

Gender Diversity in Cooperative Boards: Favoring and Hindering Factors in a Scoping Review

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Abstract

Cooperatives are built on principles of democracy and equity, yet women continue to be underrepresented in their governance structures. This Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses extension for Scoping Reviews (PRISMA-ScR) scoping review synthesizes 25 peer-reviewed empirical studies on factors enabling or hindering women's participation in cooperative boards. Across studies, individual enablers include qualifications, prior performance, and collaborative leadership, whereas stereotypes, heightened expectations to overperform, and internalized bias constrain access and legitimacy. Organizational enablers include inclusive recruitment, mentoring, and flexible arrangements; barriers include male-dominated cultures, restrictive bylaws, and informal networks. At the environmental level, quota legislation, training initiatives, and support networks can foster change, but weak enforcement and entrenched social norms often limit impact. Anchored in a Justice, Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (JEDI) lens, the review argues that advancing gender diversity requires structural and cultural reforms beyond “fix-the-women” approaches, and offers implications for cooperative leaders and policymakers. These insights support efforts to align cooperative governance with SDGs 5, 10, and 16.

Introduction

Cooperatives aspire to be truly democratic organizations, and their boards must reflect gender diversity. Yet women remain persistently underrepresented in cooperative governance, revealing a gap between cooperative ideals and empirical reality (International Cooperative Alliance, 2017).

Cooperatives are part of the civil society and nonprofit sector, often described as embodying some of the most democratic governance structures. According to the International Cooperative Alliance (2015), a cooperative is “an autonomous association of persons united voluntarily to meet their common economic, social, and cultural needs and aspirations through a jointly owned and democratically controlled enterprise” (p. 8). Cooperatives are based on the values of democracy, equality, equity and solidarity, as well as ethical values of honesty, openness, social responsibility, and caring for others (ICA, 2015). Thus, when women face barriers to leadership in such organizations, this contradicts their declared values and also suggests that similar or greater challenges are likely to persist across the wider field of voluntary and nonprofit organizations.

Within this framework, it is essential to distinguish between equality and equity. Equality refers to the same formal rights and opportunities, while equity requires differentiated measures to compensate for historical and systemic barriers, thereby ensuring substantive fairness (European Commission, 1998). International bodies emphasize that equality without equity risks perpetuating exclusion (UN Women, 2024). In organizational research, this conceptual progression is reflected in the evolution from Diversity and Inclusion (DI), which emphasized representation, to Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI), which addressed fairness, and more recently to Justice, Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (JEDI), which places justice at the center of organizational change (Stivers et al., 2023). From this perspective, gender diversity on cooperative boards should not be reduced to quotas or compliance but seen as a structural matter of fairness and legitimacy.

Organizations that promote gender equity not only align with values of fairness, equal opportunity, and respect for diversity, but also enhance the legitimacy and effectiveness of decision-making processes (Cook & Glass, 2014; Terjesen et al., 2009). Empirical studies further demonstrate that gender-diverse boards positively impact governance outcomes: the presence of women in decision-making bodies is associated with greater monitoring diligence and broader strategic perspectives (Post & Byron, 2015), and can contribute to enhanced transparency in nonprofits (Benito-Esteban et al., 2024), improved accountability and self-evaluation (Ortega-Rodríguez et al., 2023), and fairer executive compensation practices (Lee, 2023). These benefits align with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, particularly SDG 5 on gender equality, SDG 10 on reducing inequalities, and SDG 16 on strong

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institutions. Yet progress remains slow, as UN Women (2024) warns that, at the current rate, gender parity in senior leadership will not be achieved before 2050.

Compounding these challenges, recent political shifts have fueled an anti-DEI agenda that weakens diversity programs across government, education, and corporate sectors (Ng et al., 2025). Against this backdrop, cooperatives, with dual economic and social missions, are well positioned to advance this agenda, as affirmed by the 2025 UN International Year of Cooperatives resolution (United Nations, 2024). Their capacity to mitigate inequalities and foster democratic participation positions cooperatives as a comparatively less examined setting for assessing inclusive governance, with relevant empirical insights dispersed across sectors and disciplines, while their hybrid nature frames them as ethical alternatives to investor-owned firms (Camargo Benavides & Ehrenhard, 2021).

Nevertheless, this potential contrasts sharply with current practice. Women constitute a substantial portion of cooperative membership globally, frequently the majority, yet remain underrepresented in governance and decision-making bodies (ICA, 2024; ILO, 2015). Despite the relevance of cooperatives to economic and social development worldwide, sex-disaggregated statistics on the composition of boards across cooperative sectors are still fragmented or unavailable. International organizations such as Committee for the Promotion and Advancement of Cooperatives (COPAC) emphasize that the lack of such governance data poses a barrier to monitoring gender equality progress in cooperatives (COPAC, 2025; ILO, 2025).

Where data are available, they reveal a persistent gap. In the global credit union sector, women represent approximately half of the membership base, with median values ranging from 48% to 54% depending on the region, according to World Council of Credit Unions (World Council of Credit Unions, 2025). However, female participation in governance remains significantly lower. In 2024, the median share of women on the boards of national credit union associations reached 33% in Europe and only 11% in Latin America, indicating a consistent pattern of underrepresentation in leadership (World Council of Credit Unions, 2025). This discrepancy is not unique to financial cooperatives. Similar gaps arise across other sectors whenever data are available. Although grounded in values of equity and democracy (ICA, 2015), cooperatives cannot be assumed to be inherently inclusive; empirical evidence indicates persistent gender gaps in governance (ICA, 2017; ILO, 2015). Moreover, despite the normative promise of cooperatives, existing scholarship on gender diversity has focused predominantly on traditional investor-owned firms (Adams & Ferreira, 2009; Campbell & Mínguez-Vera, 2008; Post & Byron, 2015). As a result, the cooperative model remains comparatively less examined in mainstream organizational research (Camargo Benavides & Ehrenhard, 2021). Given the breadth of contexts and the heterogeneity of approaches used in this literature, a scoping review is well suited to map the existing evidence and identify gaps. Therefore, this scoping review addresses the following research question:

RQ. What personal, organizational, and environmental factors enable or hinder women's participation on cooperative boards?

In this review, "participation" refers to women's access to and inclusion in cooperative board positions, as reported in primary studies. Addressing this question requires a multilevel analytical perspective that considers how dynamics at the individual, organizational, and broader institutional context interact to shape inclusion in cooperative governance.

Theoretical foundation

Gender diversity and board governance

Gender diversity in governance has emerged as a critical issue in scientific literature on nonprofit and hybrid organizations, with two dominant approaches: quantitative and qualitative shaping the field.

From a quantitative perspective, gender diversity is primarily assessed in terms of the numerical representation of women and men in decision-making spaces. For instance, Hernández-Ortiz et al. (2020) emphasize that equitable gender balance on boards is a foundational element of inclusive governance. This approach has often focused on the implementation of mandatory quotas as a mechanism to accelerate parity. While some scholars (e.g., Labelle et al., 2015) caution that quotas may lead to formal compliance without substantive inclusion, others (Mensi-Klarbach & Seierstad, 2020) contend that such policies can drive long-term equality, especially in institutional contexts where informal resistance to inclusion persists.

Empirical cases underscore the potential of quotas to catalyze change. In Norway, a combination of voluntary and mandatory quotas significantly increased the presence of women on cooperative and corporate boards, from 17% in 2003 to 39% in 2009 (Brandth & Bjørkhaug, 2015). This reform disrupted the traditionally male-dominated board culture and fostered new understandings of gender (Brandth & Bjørkhaug, 2015), while broader evidence indicates that gender diversity can enhance decision making by diversifying perspectives (Adams & Ferreira, 2009; Post & Byron, 2015). In nonprofit contexts, Lee (2023) found that greater female representation on boards was associated with more equitable CEO compensation, underscoring the broader governance implications of gender diversity for justice and fairness.

The qualitative approach, on the other hand, considers that gender diversity transcends the numerical to include the integration of diverse perspectives, values, and leadership styles. Hernández-Nicolás et al. (2019) highlight that, to advance female representation in leadership spaces, it is essential to address structural barriers such as the "glass ceiling," defined by the European Commission (1998) as "an invisible barrier generated by male-dominated organizational structures" (p. 37). Holgersson and Hvenmark (2023) further challenge the treatment of gender as a static individual attribute and advocate for feminist organizational theory to analyze how gender is socially and structurally (re)produced in nonprofit settings. From this lens, gender is embedded in organizational routines and discourses that must be interrogated to reveal mechanisms of exclusion and control.

The presence of women on boards, according to Brandth and Bjørkhaug (2015), has improved the quality of decisions by incorporating different approaches and values, noting that gender diversity not only benefits the internal dynamics of organizations, but also strengthens their adaptability and effectiveness. Benito-Esteban et al. (2024) reinforce this by showing that gender diversity, in combination with other board characteristics such as size and expertise, can be part of the configurations that lead to higher levels of web transparency, a key indicator of accountability and ethical governance.

Cooperatives as hybrid and democratic organizations

Despite the growing number of studies on gender diversity on boards of directors, little attention remains devoted to the inclusion of women especially in the context of cooperatives. According to

the International Cooperative Alliance, cooperatives are democratic organizations controlled by their members, who actively participate in setting their policies and making decisions. Men and women serving as elected representatives are accountable to the membership (ICA, 2015). This structure, in principle, offers a fertile ground for gender-inclusive governance, yet empirical research on whether this promise is being realized is scarce (Camargo Benavides & Ehrenhard, 2021).

The absence of such analysis limits the development of a robust theoretical framework that links gender diversity in cooperatives to broader principles of justice, inclusion, and accountability. Ortega-Rodríguez et al. (2023) reinforce this point by identifying board diversity as a governance mechanism that enhances stakeholder trust and strengthens internal control processes.

Unlike traditional firms, cooperatives provide a distinctive governance model that can shape female participation. They are also recognized for their wider social impact: according to the International Cooperative Alliance, cooperatives “provide jobs or work opportunities to 280 million people across the globe, in other words, 10% of the world’s employed population” and, as member-owned businesses, they “strengthen their social and human capital and develop their communities” (ICA, 2024). This impact takes special relevance considering the United Nations resolution designating 2025 as the International Year of Cooperatives, highlighting their role in achieving the 2030 agenda (United Nations, 2024). However, the specific factors that impact this dynamic have not yet been sufficiently explored in scientific literature.

In this context, critical scholars have emphasized the need for more nuanced and theoretically grounded approaches to studying gender in the third sector. Dodge et al. (2021) advocate for the use of critical and feminist methodologies to uncover the subtle, often invisible mechanisms of exclusion that positivist analyses frequently overlook. They contend that promoting ethical and meaningful organizational change entails more than increasing the numerical presence of women in leadership; it requires rethinking the deeper cultural norms, institutional logics, and power structures that sustain inequality. This call for a structural and intersectional perspective is particularly relevant in the case of cooperatives.

The Stone and Colella framework in the context of gender and cooperatives

To analyze these dynamics, this study adopts the theoretical model of Stone and Colella (1996). Although originally developed to examine disability inclusion, the model’s emphasis on stereotypes and the role of observers provides a valuable lens for analyzing gender in cooperative governance. Its multilevel structure was adapted here to classify enablers and barriers to women’s participation.

The Stone and Colella (1996) model’s core strength lies in its systematic examination of how stereotypes, perceptions, and observer characteristics influence inclusion and exclusion processes in organizational settings. This theoretical foundation is directly applicable to gender diversity research, as both disability and gender represent social categories that trigger stereotype-based judgments and differential treatment in organizational contexts (Heilman, 2012).

The model’s emphasis on the role of observers, those who make decisions about inclusion or exclusion, is particularly relevant for cooperative governance, where board composition decisions are often made by existing board members or cooperative assemblies. These decision makers act as “observers” whose perceptions and biases significantly influence women’s access to governance positions.

The framework developed by Stone and Colella identifies three main categories of factors that shape inclusion and exclusion in organizational contexts:

- a) *Personal factors* refer both to the attributes of individuals subject to stereotypes and to the characteristics of those who evaluate them.
- b) *Organizational factors* encompass the norms, values, policies, and reward systems that define opportunities within organizations.
- c) *Environmental and legal factors* capture the influence of external regulations, legislation, and broader societal norms.

In this study, these dimensions are applied to the context of gender and cooperatives. Personal factors include women’s qualifications, experiences, and the perceptions of observers regarding their competence. Organizational factors refer to cooperative governance structures, internal cultures, and practices that either promote or constrain female participation. Environmental and legal factors encompass equality legislation, quota policies, and public initiatives designed to foster women’s access to boards of directors.

This adaptation allows the framework to serve as a comprehensive analytical tool for classifying both enablers and barriers to gender diversity in cooperative governance, highlighting how dynamics at different levels interact in shaping women’s opportunities for participation.

Method

This study was conducted as a scoping review to map the breadth and nature of evidence on factors that enable or hinder gender diversity on cooperative boards, identify research gaps, clarify key concepts, and lay the groundwork for future research and policy (Peters et al., 2020). The choice of a scoping review reflects the need for an overarching overview of heterogeneous literature rather than a focused estimate of effect; unlike systematic reviews, which address narrowly defined questions and include formal critical appraisal and, where appropriate, quantitative synthesis, scoping reviews prioritize comprehensive mapping and conceptual clarification while still following systematic and transparent methods (Peters et al., 2020; Tricco et al., 2018).

The review followed the PRISMA-ScR (*Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses extension for Scoping Reviews*) to ensure transparency, replicability, and auditability of the search and selection process. PRISMA-ScR provides a standardized four-stage flow (identification, screening, eligibility, inclusion) that is increasingly adopted in management, social sciences, and nonprofit research for mapping heterogeneous evidence (Tricco et al., 2018). Recent bibliometric evidence confirms this expansion, revealing a 58% average annual growth in scoping reviews published in the social sciences between 2015 and 2021, including applied management domains (Logan et al., 2024).

Searches were conducted systematically across the selected databases (see Table 2 for the search strategy). Titles and abstracts were screened, and the full texts of potentially relevant records were retrieved and, if meeting the inclusion criteria, analyzed in parallel and independently by two investigators; disagreements were resolved by discussion or by consulting a third reviewer. In the data extraction, the following elements were included: (a) authors, (b) year of publication, (c) article titles, (d) abstracts, (e) keywords, (f) theoretical framework, (g) type of cooperative analyzed, (h) methodological approach, (i) factors favoring gender diversity in cooperative boards, and (j) factors hindering gender diversity in cooperative boards. These elements are presented in Table 1. Because the included studies

Table 1. Data extracted from selected articles

Authors	Year	Title	Journal	Method	Sample	Country	Summary
McKillop, D. G., Briscoe, R., McCarthy, O., Ward, M., & Ferguson, C.	2003	Irish credit unions: Exploring the gender mix	<i>VOLUNTAS: International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organizations</i>	Quantitative	Credit unions	Ireland	Credit unions are voluntary cooperative financial institutions. There are currently 621 credit unions in Ireland serving two million members. Credit unions embrace the principle of gender inclusiveness, which is considered a fundamental cooperative concept. Based on a survey of 500 Irish credit unions, this study explores the role of women in credit unions. In light of women's participation rates in the labor market and in specific organizations such as trade unions, the study suggests that the gender balance in credit unions is superior to that in other parts of Irish society. However, there is some evidence of gender imbalance in the composition of credit union boards, with this being most visible in key decision-making positions such as chairman and vice chairman. It also emerges that the gender imbalance becomes more pronounced in larger credit unions, supporting the claim that women are found in greater numbers on the boards of smaller, less connected nonprofit organizations.
de Cabo, R. M., del Campo, J. I., & Nogués, R. G.	2009	Financial participation and the role of women in decision making in cooperative societies: Boards of directors	<i>European Journal of Management and Business Economics</i>	Mixed methods	Cooperatives in Spain	Spain	This article analyzes whether cooperative companies have, due to their own characteristics, conditions that favor the presence of women on boards of directors. To this end, a discriminant analysis is carried out and a probit model is estimated on the largest Spanish companies by operating income, with the cooperative corporate form, together with other control variables, being an explanatory factor of this presence. From the results of both analyses, we conclude that the environments that favor the participation of women on boards of directors are precisely those that differentiate cooperative companies from the rest. Thus, favorable and close environments between workers and managers, such as those found in small, family or cooperative companies, and which apply and promote conciliation measures, facilitate the presence of women on company boards. Finally, we offer a series of implications derived from the application of certain cooperative principles to other companies that could favor board diversity and good corporate governance.
Esteban Salvador, M. L.	2013	Are the cooperatives in more favorable of having women in their board of directors than other entities?	<i>REVESCO Journal of Cooperative Studies</i>	Qualitative	Cooperatives in Spain	Spain	This article analyzes which companies have governing bodies that are more favorable to female participation in the period prior to the development of measures and recommendations on the presence of women on the boards of directors of large Spanish companies, including cooperatives. It also relates profitability with gender in their governing bodies. For this purpose, in a first analysis, the economic profitability of nonfinancial companies listed on the continuous market and of those which, although not listed on this market, have been obliged to present an Annual Corporate Governance Report to the National Securities Market Commission

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Table 1. (Continued)

Authors	Year	Title	Journal	Method	Sample	Country	Summary
							since 2004, is studied. Subsequently, the sample is reduced after the exclusion of companies not listed on the continuous market. The results show that a single entity contributed to changing profitability and is placed as a study model. A distinguishing feature of this company is its legal form, as it is a cooperative company.
Bezboruah, K. C., & Pillai, V.	2015	Exploring the participation of women in financial cooperatives and credit unions in developing countries	<i>VOLUNTAS: International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organizations</i>	Quantitative	Credit unions	Developing countries	Women's participation in microfinance institutions (MFIs) is considered to contribute to the development of developing economies. Applying stakeholder theory, we examine the magnitude of women's participation in MFIs as a function of their legal characteristics, i.e., cooperative and noncooperative, along the following dimensions: organizational size, efficiency, loan size, and gender mix. We observe that for cooperative-type MFIs, increases in average loan size are associated with decreases in female participation in management and governance. In addition, the findings show that with increases in female borrower participation, the number of women in organizational governance also increases. These findings suggest important research and practical implications regarding women's empowerment through participation in mutual cooperative societies. We conclude that credit unions and cooperatives could be an effective tool for improving women's participation in management and organizational governance.
Brandth, B., & Bjørkhaug, H.	2015	Gender Quotas for Agricultural Boards: Changing Constructions of Gender?	<i>Gender, Work & Organization</i>	Qualitative	Agricultural cooperatives	Norway	This article explores the processes by which gender is given meaning through social interaction in boardrooms. In Norway, along with mandatory quotas regulating the composition of the boards of public limited companies, voluntary quotas were designed to increase women's membership on the boards of agricultural cooperatives. This radical measure to ensure a minimum of 40% women makes these boards an interesting site for investigating the construction of gender in a traditionally male-dominated organization. In the debate, arguments in favor of a quota accentuated the diversity and differences between women's and men's skills, opinions and values. Analysis of interview data from the boards of four agricultural cooperatives suggests that equal representation is a silenced and taken-for-granted value. Equality and diversity are not understood as incompatible ideas, and gender is dynamically produced through practice rather than constituted as an inherent and fixed attribute. Gender as a difference is less pervasive than expected, as women tend to be recognized as belonging to the gender-neutral category of a board representative despite any recognized differences. The study demonstrates that voluntary quotas can change the context and challenge old assumptions and promote new understandings of gender in local situations.

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Authors	Year	Title	Journal	Method	Sample	Country	Summary
Huang, C., Zazale, S., Othman, R., Aris, N., & Ariff, S. M.	2015	Influence of Cooperative Members' Participation and Gender on Performance	<i>Journal of Southeast Asian Research</i>	Quantitative	39 cooperatives	Malaysia	Although its origin goes back to the private sector, corporate governance is applicable to cooperatives, which are a form of corporation. Therefore, cooperatives also face problems associated with governance. In addition, agency theory holds that the board of directors plays a crucial role in protecting the interests of shareholders. Directors of cooperatives acting as agents of their members play an important role in linking the actions of managers to the interests of their members and customers. Good and effective governance helps improve the financial performance and sustainability of cooperatives. The success of a cooperative depends on the degree of member involvement. This article aims to examine the association between cooperative governance in terms of member participation and gender (male board composition), and cooperative performance. The study examined the annual reports from 2008 to 2012 of 34 cooperatives in Malaysia. It found that male directors dominated the board of cooperatives in Malaysia. The relationship between male board composition and cooperative performance was insignificant. Mean member participation (directors' attendance at board meetings) was found to be high, but had no significant association with cooperative performance. The scope of analysis in this study was limited by the available data set. In the future, further research on the influence of governance on cooperative performance can be explored by analyzing other governance characteristics through interviews or with the use of questionnaire surveys.
Hernández-Nicolás, C. M., Ugedo, J. F. M., & Vera, A. M.	2016	The influence of gender in the direction of Spanish cooperative societies on profitability and indebtedness: An empirical analysis	<i>REVESCO Journal of Cooperative Studies</i>	Quantitative	Cooperatives in Spain	Spain	This article addresses the market's demand for a new corporate governance that ensures the presence of women in decision making in order to respond to new social needs. Thus, this article analyzes the influence of the gender diversity of board members on profitability and the level of indebtedness for a sample of 5199 Spanish cooperatives. Unlike capitalist societies, these organizations present a series of peculiarities in their governance, since the members are at the same time principals, agents and clients. The study focuses on the Spanish context, where there is an open debate on the importance of female business management driven, as in other countries, by the proliferation of legislation on gender equality, Spain being, moreover, the pioneer country in having specific legislation on Social Economy. The results show that cooperatives with greater female representation on their Governing Boards are more profitable. On the other hand, those boards with a higher percentage of women show a lower level of indebtedness.

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Table 1. (Continued)

Authors	Year	Title	Journal	Method	Sample	Country	Summary
Palomo-Zurdo, R., Gutiérrez-Fernández, M., & Fernández-Torres, Y.	2017	The gender issue at the boards of directors of co-operative banks	CIRIEC-Spain, <i>Journal of Public, Social and Cooperative Economics</i>	Mixed Methods	Credit unions	Spain	- The study aims to analyze the impact of gender diversity on the economic profitability (measured by return on assets, ROA) of Spanish cooperative banks. - Spanish cooperative banks have a very low proportion of women on their boards of directors, with an average of only 7.7% of board members being women. - A higher proportion of women on boards contributed positively to improving return on assets (RoA) through an increase in return on equity (RoE) and financial leverage, but this positive effect was reversed during the economic crisis period from 2008 to 2014.
Thapa, B. K.	2017	Gender Issues in Cooperative Societies of Ilam	<i>Journal of Advanced Academic Research</i>	Mixed methods	226 members of Savings and Loan, Tea and Dairy cooperatives 153 men and 73 were women	Nepal	A cooperative is an organization run by like-minded professionals to improve their socioeconomic development with common objectives in a democratic manner. The success or failure of any cooperative depends on the role of its members. By increasing the number of female members and providing them with governance opportunities, cooperatives will be successful. This study was conducted to explore the status of women cooperative memberships and governance such as board of directors and job opportunities provided by the cooperatives of interest in Ilam, Nepal. The nature of the study was quantitative and qualitative, which involved a survey method and in-depth interview. There were 226 cooperative members from three types of cooperatives: savings and credit cooperatives, tea cooperatives, and dairy cooperatives. The present study showed that most of the women members were deprived of their basic rights of participation in the annual general meeting, board of directors and office work of their cooperatives of interest. Therefore, cooperatives are requested to encourage their female members to be members and govern.
Esteban-Salvador, L., Gargallo-Castel, A., & Pérez-Sanz, J.	2019	The presidency of the governing boards of cooperatives in Spain: a gendered approach	<i>Journal of Co-Operative Organization and Management</i>	Quantitative	Cooperativas da Espanha	Spain	International cooperative values and principles are guidelines that could lead cooperatives towards greater gender equality in the decision-making process. Stimulated by the interest in cooperatives and by the growing demand to advocate for a faster increase in the presence of female presidents in boardrooms, this research aims to analyze the impact of the gender of the cooperative president on some variables related to financial and employment ratios, corporate governance and other characteristics of the organization in Spain. In order to carry out the empirical study, we have collected and analyzed information on the main Spanish cooperative entities. We found that cooperatives with higher liquidity ratio, higher number of employees, higher percentage of female employees, higher ratio of personnel costs divided by operating income, lower indebtedness and fewer years since the appointment of the president have a higher probability of belonging to

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Table 1. (Continued)

Authors	Year	Title	Journal	Method	Sample	Country	Summary
							the group of cooperatives with a board chaired by a woman. Women-led cooperatives have a higher ratio of personnel costs to operating income, which could indicate a higher intensity of cooperative principles and values related to the primacy of workers' economic welfare over economic benefits.
Hernández-Nicolás, C. M., Martín-Ugedo, J. F., & Mínguez-Vera, A.	2019	The effect of gender diversity on the board of Spanish agricultural cooperatives on returns and debt: An empirical analysis	<i>Agribusiness</i>	Qualitative	Agricultural cooperatives	Spain	This article focuses on gender diversity on the boards of directors of Spanish agricultural cooperatives. Specifically, it examines the effect of board gender diversity on profitability, indebtedness and economic risk. Cooperatives differ significantly from investor-owned firms because cooperative members are producers, agents and customers of the cooperatives. In Spain, there is an ongoing debate about the importance of women in business management. Spain is also a pioneer in enacting specific legislation for the social economy. The sample examined includes 672 agricultural cooperatives. The results show that companies with greater female representation on their boards of directors have higher profitability and operating risk and lower levels of debt.
Hernández-Ortiz, M. J., Martí, E. G., Jiménez, R. M., Ortega, C. P., & Jiménez, C. R.	2020	The effect of Gender Diversity on the performance of Spanish agri-food cooperatives	<i>REVESCO Journal of Cooperative Studies</i>	Quantitative	Agricultural cooperatives	Spain	Gender diversity on boards of directors has the potential to add value to the organizations that promote it. Under the premise of theories such as agency, resource dependence or stakeholder theories, several studies have analyzed the relationship between the number of women on boards and the economic and financial performance of companies. However, a review of these studies leads to two clear conclusions: firstly, that the results are not conclusive, since positive, negative and inconclusive relationships have been found between the number of women on boards and the economic and financial performance of companies. and nonsignificant relationships have been found between the two variables. The second is that most of these studies have been carried out on large listed companies, mainly Corporations and Limited Liability Companies. Thus, this article attempts to contribute to the existing literature on this subject by analyzing the gender diversity of the Boards of Directors of Spanish cooperative societies and its influence on their profitability results. Specifically, 1171 cooperative societies in the agri-food sector in Spain have been analyzed using statistical regression techniques. The results show that there are significant differences depending on the type of Board, classifying them according to the degree of parity of each one, and the ROE and ROA profitability measures. Furthermore, in the case of ROA, a positive and significant relationship is also observed between the percentage of women on the board and this profitability variable.

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Table 1. (Continued)

Authors	Year	Title	Journal	Method	Sample	Country	Summary
Meira, D., Luísa Martinho, A., & Castro, C.	2020	Gender (un)equality in the bodies of Portuguese cooperatives: an exploratory analysis	<i>Management and Society</i>	Quantitative	Cooperatives in Portugal	Portugal	The article reflects on the ways of structuring the empirical field of gender equality in the cooperative sphere in Portugal. The existence of a deep and intimate connection between the legal regime of cooperatives and gender equality served as a starting point for this study. Equality constitutes a structuring value of the legal regime of cooperatives, in strict connection with the cooperative principles, with special emphasis on the principles of democratic management, voluntary and free association, education, training and information, and interest in the community. In addition to formal equality, which results from the cooperative legislation, bylaws and internal regulations of the cooperative, the study aims to determine whether there is constructed gender equality. For this, based on a secondary source, we conducted a documentary analysis of the Accreditation Portal Database, which represents 749 cooperatives with credentials in force as of 30/11/2018, provided by CASES—Cooperativa António Sérgio para a Economia Social. The Database is the result of the supply, by the cooperatives themselves, of information related to the 2017 fiscal year, concerning: number of members of the Board of Directors, of the General Assembly, number of members of the Administrative Body and number of members of the Supervisory Body. For this purpose, nonparametric tests were performed to assess whether there are significant differences in the roles played by women and men in Portuguese cooperatives and whether these differ according to branch, region, size and age of the cooperative. The data presented reveal a clear hierarchy in women's participation among the three major categories analyzed. In descending order, women assume greater weight in volunteer work (65.7%), followed by paid work (58.8%) (with a subhierarchy between noncooperative and cooperative women) and, finally, in administrative and supervisory bodies (22.9%).
Coba, E. M., et al.	2022	Gender diversity and performance in the Ecuadorian financial sector	<i>Revista Finanzas y Política Económica</i>	Quantitative	24 private banks and 31 large savings-and-credit cooperatives	Ecuador	The financial sector is characterized by a greater presence of men in senior management levels. For this reason, this article aims to determine the influence of gender diversity on the financial performance of these institutions. This article analyzes a sample of 31 savings and credit cooperatives, as well as the 24 private banks in Ecuador. Gender diversity was measured with three indicators: the percentage of women, the Blau Index and the Shannon Index; the performance variable was measured with ROA and ROE and the debt ratio; and with a quantitative approach they were related through econometric models. The results show that cooperatives have greater gender diversity than banks. Gender diversity does affect ROA but not ROE or indebtedness. Greater inclusion of women in management positions is still required for better diversity.

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Table 1. (Continued)

Authors	Year	Title	Journal	Method	Sample	Country	Summary
Périlleux, A., & Szafarz, A.	2022	Women in the boardroom: a bottom-up approach to the trickle-down effect.	<i>Small Business Economics</i>	Quantitative	Credit unions	Senegal	This article argues that behavioral modeling can explain the impact of gender diversity on corporate performance. We theorize that female employees are driven by female leadership, gain greater motivation and achieve higher productivity, which makes their female directors more effective. We test this bottom-up approach to the trickle-down hypothesis (on manually collected data among local cooperatives offering microcredit in Senegal). All surveyed organizations are similar and small, which allows us to use homogeneous performance metrics. They all outsource their human resources management to the same third party, which mitigates the risk of endogeneity. The data cover more than 100,000 triads consisting of: board gender predominance, CEO gender, and loan officer gender. Better financial performance is achieved when the triad is gender-uniform, either male or female, confirming the importance of behavioral modeling and suggesting that the performance of female board members depends on the gender composition of the workforce.
Bastida, M., Oliveira, A., & Vázquez-Tain, M. A.	2023	Are cooperatives gender sensitive? A confirmatory and predictive analysis of women's collective entrepreneurship	<i>Annals of Public and Cooperative Economics</i>	Quantitative	115 women and 36 men, members of Spanish cooperatives	Spain	The literature on entrepreneurship has developed a huge body of fruitful research to explain why women do not engage in business as often as men. However, relatively little is known about the role that different business models may play in driving women's entrepreneurial activity, which is examined in this study. In this article, we develop a model to empirically test the relationship between women's motivations to become entrepreneurs and their willingness to embark on business through cooperatives, a particular organizational model. We find that the fit between women's needs and expectations and the guiding principles of cooperatives is decisive for the materialization of female entrepreneurship. Furthermore, we explore the role that institutions can play in fostering this link. In doing so, we extend the literature on women's entrepreneurship by highlighting key factors to better channel the development of this potential resource for economic development. Our confirmatory model highlights the role of cooperatives as a type of organization particularly suited to the interests and needs of women entrepreneurs. Thus, the promotion of this business model can be useful to improve the number of women entrepreneurs and, in turn, enhance economic development.

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Authors	Year	Title	Journal	Method	Sample	Country	Summary
Hansen, H. O., & Asmild, M.	2023	Women's participation on the boards of farmer-owned cooperatives	<i>Frontiers in Veterinary Science</i>	Mixed methods	Agricultural cooperatives	Denmark	The article shows that agricultural cooperatives have special problems regarding the presence of women on the boards. Agricultural cooperatives in Denmark have been chosen as cases in this article, as they are quite large, exposed to international competition and have substantial market power. Based on annual reports of 25 agricultural cooperatives and two of their investor-owned subsidiaries in the years 2005–2022, input from current and former board members of agricultural cooperatives, CSR reports, etc., several conclusions are drawn. Cooperatives have particular challenges in terms of gender diversity on boards due to their specific structure and requirements compared to investor-owned companies. Different types of barriers can be identified that limit women's representation on boards: (1) Institutional barriers in terms of bylaws and cooperative principles; (2) Structural barriers in the form of a narrow or biased recruitment base; (3) Historical and cultural barriers, where agriculture is typically a male-dominated business. Women's representation on agricultural cooperative boards is relatively low but increasing. From 2005 to 2021, the weighted average participation of women on boards has increased from approximately 1% to 20%. Gender diversity in agricultural cooperatives is consistently lower than in listed companies. The increase in the representativeness of women is mainly due to the presence of more female external members. Since 2013, the proportion of women has increased and in 2021 there were more female than male external board members. Female board members are more common in large agricultural cooperatives than in small ones. A positive correlation is identified between company size and female representation. This is supported by the greater focus of large cooperatives in annual reports and CSR strategies on women's representativeness. Based on the diversity policy of the cooperatives, their explicit and specific targets for women's representativeness on boards, interviews with board members, etc., a clear awareness of the challenge of gender diversity on boards is identified.
García Companys, A.	2024	Gender diversity as an instrument of good governance in cooperatives	CIRIEC-Spain, <i>Journal of Public, Social and Cooperative Economics</i>	Qualitative	Cooperative legislation in Spain	Spain	The article proposes a review of Spanish cooperative laws with the aim of identifying those provisions that contain measures to favor gender equality in the composition of the administrative and management bodies of these societies. Bearing in mind that equality is one of the essential values of the cooperative identity, it would be expected that the concreteness of this principle in the context of corporate governance would be at least at the level of that envisaged for capitalist companies, especially listed companies with which cooperatives

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Authors	Year	Title	Journal	Method	Sample	Country	Summary
							share a similar corporate structure. However, the analysis shows that, though some regional laws stand out for having included significant measures in this area of a generic, corporate, economic, and promotional nature, the majority still do not explicitly state any commitment to gender equality. It is therefore considered appropriate to formulate a series of principles and recommendations on this matter along the lines of those set out in the Good Governance Code of Listed Companies (CBGSC), to which the entire movement should adhere, subject to the principle of comply or explain. In this regard, the Principles of European Cooperative Law (PECOL) could serve as inspiration.
García-Martí, E., Hernández-Ortiz, M. J., Ruiz-Jiménez, M. del C., Pedrosa-Ortega, C., & Martínez-Jiménez, R.	2024	Female board leadership and corporate response to sustainability initiatives: An exploratory case in agri-food cooperatives.	CIRIEC-Spain, <i>Journal of Public, Social and Cooperative Economics</i>	Qualitative	13 Spanish agri-food cooperatives	Spain	Currently, there is great interest in the participation of women in decision-making areas, since different studies show that the presence of women in management influences the improvement of the company's sustainability. This work contributes to a better understanding of the characteristics of female leadership in agri-food cooperatives through a case study in Spain. The objective has been to analyze the process of women's access to the board of directors, the characteristics of their leadership and the influence that their leadership has on business sustainability, measured through its three ESG (Environmental, Social and Governance) components. The results indicate that the woman becomes a member of the board of directors after demonstrating her professional skills to the members. Her leadership can be defined as transformational and is supported by the cooperative culture. In addition, it is highlighted that there is a positive relationship between women in leadership positions and women's participation on the board
Meliá-Martí, E., Tormo-Carbó, G., & Fernández-Guadano, J.	2024	Board gender diversity and employee productivity: The moderating role of female leaders	<i>European Research on Management and Business Economics</i>	Quantitative	Agricultural cooperatives	Spain	Drawing on the Motivational Role Modeling Theory and Critical Mass Theory, the main objectives of this article are to analyze the impact of Board Gender Diversity (BGD) on Employee Productivity (EP) and to investigate the moderating role of a Female CEO or a Female Board Chair on this relationship in Social Economy companies. The methodology used is a fixed-effects regression with panel data for 1,914 Spanish Social economy companies in the agri-food sector from 2017 to 2021. Our findings uncover a nonlinear relationship between BGD and EP displaying a descendent curvilinear pattern, though not strictly U-shaped. Moreover, we confirm the moderating influence of a Female Chair, noting that its presence shifts the relationship between BGD and EP from an inverted curvilinear pattern to a U-shaped one. In this context, the board requires a minimum presence of women, set at a critical mass of 13%. However, the moderating impact of a Female CEO remains inconclusive. This research underscores the significance of investigating board

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Authors	Year	Title	Journal	Method	Sample	Country	Summary
							diversity, specifically emphasizing female leadership in understanding the link between BGD and EP. Moreover, to the best of our knowledge, this study is the first to explore the impact of BGD on EP by developing an integrated model based on Motivational Role Modeling Theory and Critical Mass Theory, and calculating the critical mass when a Female Chair is present on the board.
Ugur-Cinar, M., Cinar, K., Onculer-Yayalar, E., & Akyuz, S.	2024	The political economy of women's cooperatives in Turkey: A social reproduction perspective	<i>Gender, Work & Organization</i>	Qualitative	Members of 23 women's cooperatives in different regions of Turkey	Turkey	The article analyzes the viability of women's participation in women's cooperatives in Turkey, focusing on the sustainability of cooperatives' economic activities and the recruitment and continued participation of individual women members. The study adopts a feminist social reproduction perspective to understand the underlying dynamics of women's participation in cooperatives, including the permeability between women's social reproduction obligations, their relationship with the state and the economic market. The analysis demonstrates that family, social and political issues related to social reproduction must be addressed before focusing on the impact of cooperatives on women's empowerment in order to ensure the success of women's cooperatives and meaningful opportunities for women's participation.
Vázquez Ruano, T.	2024	Regulatory proposals on gender equality in cooperative management	CIRIEC-Spain, <i>Journal of Public, Social and Cooperative Economics</i>	Qualitative	Cooperative legislation in Spain	Spain	The author examines the principle of democratic and participative management in the cooperative entity and the principle of equality, which implies the absence of inequality or discrimination. Thus, regardless of gender, the person who holds the status of member is entitled to participate in the cooperative activity and in the organizational structure as a member of the social bodies that manage it. One of the priorities of the current proposal for regulatory reform, which is intended to promote the social economy (Preliminary Draft Comprehensive Law), is to adapt the national text to current economic and social requirements and determining factors. Consequently, and taking into account the cooperative principle of equality, the effectiveness of the same between men and women is advocated and, in particular, as regards its significance in the management of the cooperative entity.
Marlier, Z., & Dufays, F.	2025	(In)Equality and commitments: Women on cooperatives' boards of directors in Belgium	<i>Annals of Public and Cooperative Economics</i>	Qualitative	Women directors (from 21 cooperatives)	Belgium	This article explores women's commitment as members of cooperative boards and the gender-based tensions they experience, based on the analysis of interviews with women directors in Belgium. Although the underrepresentation of women in decision-making bodies of social economy enterprises has been noted by

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Authors	Year	Title	Journal	Method	Sample	Country	Summary
							some authors, women's involvement in cooperative boards remains rather unexplored. This is surprising as cooperatives, as social economy enterprises, claim to pursue (gender) equality and democratic governance. Our sample mainly includes male-dominated sectors with boards showing varied female representation. The results indicate that there is apparent equality on the boards, although little has been done to address this issue. However, underrepresentation of women and their absence from the presidency is a regular pattern. The study also reveals tensions between women's commitment to the board and family responsibilities. These systemic tensions reflect that cooperatives are products of patriarchal ontology and remain part of the system—provided their embeddedness in the capitalist economy. This research contributes to a better understanding of the different profiles of women who sit on cooperative boards and to explaining the tensions and inequalities they encounter. Additionally, it helps to identify factors that promote their commitment and thus combat their underrepresentation on boards
Martínez-León, I. M., Olmedo-Cifuentes, I., Sánchez-Navarro, J. L., & Arcas-Lario, N.	2025	Transformational leadership and performance in social economy entities: The moderating effect of board gender diversity	<i>Annals of Public and Cooperative Economics</i>	Quantitative	Worker cooperatives in Spain	Spain	Given that social economy entities (SEEs) are founded on specific values, including democracy, equality, equity and solidarity, it is reasonable to assume that their operations and performance will be impacted by the absence of discrimination and the equal representation of women in management and decision-making positions. In these organizations, transformational leadership plays a critical role by emphasizing group interests and members' personal and professional growth, which can impact organizational performance. This study examines how transformational leadership positively impacts organizational performance (rational goals, internal processes, open systems and human relations), considering the moderating effect of board gender diversity. The results of the empirical study carried out with data obtained from 174 Spanish SEEs (worker cooperatives and labor societies) confirm that transformational leadership positively impacts organizational performance, and this impact is favored by a balanced proportion of women and men in decision-making bodies. Having more women on the board of directors improves the effect of transformational leadership on performance when the level of this type of leadership is low; however, the effect of more women on the board is less positive when transformational leadership is high, making board gender balance advisable.

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Authors	Year	Title	Journal	Method	Sample	Country	Summary
Ward, A. M., Forker, J., & Reilly, B.	2025	Strategic action field theory: Explaining variation in the percentage of women on boards in credit unions	<i>Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly</i>	Quantitative	167 community credit unions	Northern Ireland	The study applies Strategic Action Field (SAF) theory to examine how affiliation to strategic fields (trade associations and the Orange Order) relates to the percentage of women on credit union boards. It finds that collective field understandings (identity and informal rules) shape female representation; affiliation with the Orange Order is associated with lower percentages of women on boards.
Authors	Keywords	Theoretical framework	Factors favoring gender diversity on cooperative boards of directors		Factors hindering gender diversity on cooperative boards of directors		
McKillop, D. G., Briscoe, R., McCarthy, O., Ward, M., & Ferguson, C.	Ireland; gender; credit unions; cooperatives.	Gender literature Nonprofit board structure Feminization and professionalization	The principle of gender inclusiveness as a fundamental cooperative concept facilitates women's participation in leadership roles.		Work-life balance issues, particularly family responsibilities, which limit the participation of female board members.		
			Regulatory frameworks such as the ILCU standards and the Credit Union Act (1997) support gender inclusiveness.		Cultural biases, stereotypes, and discriminatory attitudes that create an unwelcoming environment for women in leadership positions.		
			The cultural emphasis on gender inclusion within credit unions encourages female representation.				
			The cooperative model's inherent support for gender balance increases female representation on boards.		Gaps in policies and practices to support women's participation, such as lack of accommodations for family responsibilities, which limit female representation on boards of directors.		
de Cabo, R. M., del Campo, J. I., & Nogués, R. G.	Cooperative society, Boards of directors, Discriminant analysis, Probit.	Cooperative societies and corporate governance	Democratic governance with equal voting rights promotes women's participation in decision making.		Lack of mandatory measures to increase the representation of women on boards of directors, as current policies are mainly voluntary in nature.		
			Human capital theory		Persistent underrepresentation of women on boards despite their increasing qualifications, which has not been adequately addressed.		
			Theories of labor market segmentation		Cooperative values of equality and solidarity reinforce female representation on boards of directors.		
			Marxist theory		The principle of voluntariness and nondiscrimination, which can be a drawback when making decisions involving job changes or reductions, as the status of partner and worker can be a barrier.		
			Access to comprehensive information about the organization contributes to women's readiness to serve on boards of directors.				

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Authors	Keywords	Theoretical framework	Factors favoring gender diversity on cooperative boards of directors	Factors hindering gender diversity on cooperative boards of directors
Esteban Salvador, M. L.	Gender; corporate governance, social economy, parity, management.	Social/humanitarian perspective on the role of women in cooperatives.	Democratic participatory structures in cooperatives facilitate the involvement of women in managerial functions.	Unequal participation of women in leadership positions within cooperatives, with an underrepresentation of women on boards of directors compared to their representation in the workforce.
		Theories/models related to the business case for gender diversity, linking women's participation on boards to business performance and corporate governance.	Cooperative principles and characteristics enable the advancement of women within the organizational hierarchy.	Persistent underrepresentation of women in decision-making positions in cooperatives, despite the high percentage of women workers.
			A greater number of women on cooperative boards improves working conditions and promotes balanced results.	
			Shareholder influence in cooperatives supports a higher proportion of women board members.	Low overall participation of women in the management of social economy entities, including cooperatives.
Bezboruah, K. C., & Pillai, V.	Financial cooperatives, Credit unions, Women in decision making, Microfinance Institutions	Stakeholder theory.	Cultural and regional factors, as observed in Swedish cooperatives, favor female representation on boards.	Unequal treatment of women in cooperative leadership positions compared to their male counterparts, due to the influence of broader social and cultural biases.
			The increase in the number of women borrowers translates into more women on cooperative boards.	Imbalance in the gender composition of cooperative boards, with male members predominating in key decision-making positions.
			Client-owned cooperative models facilitate women's participation in governance.	Decreasing female representation on boards as the size of the cooperative increases.
			Professional management and structured governance in cooperatives support gender diversity.	Women are more likely to be represented on the boards of smaller, community-based and less prestigious organizations, which may not be the case for larger cooperatives.
Brandth, B., & Bjørkhaug, H.	Quota legislation, gender equality, diversity, agricultural industries, Norway	Feminist theory on the conceptualization of gender as difference or similarity.	The implementation of voluntary gender quotas increases female representation on cooperative boards of directors.	Historically male and patriarchal structure of agrarian organizations that excludes and marginalizes women's participation.
		Wollstonecraft's dilemma on the foundations of female citizenship	Active agricultural industry recruitment efforts address gender inequality and facilitate women's participation.	"Old boy network" and male culture that protects male power and dominance, creating a strong barrier to women's leadership.
		Haavind's concept of difference as segregation and hierarchization	Economic incentives for diversity encourage organizations to value diverse perspectives and enhance female participation.	Perception that women's skills, values and ways of thinking are not as valuable as the male norms that characterize the organization, leading to double standards and unequal treatment.

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Table 1. (Continued)

Authors	Keywords	Theoretical framework	Factors favoring gender diversity on cooperative boards of directors	Factors hindering gender diversity on cooperative boards of directors
Huang, C., Zazale, S., Othman, R., Aris, N., & Ariff, S. M.	Cooperative, cooperative governance, cooperative governance, performance	Gender as practice or “doing” (West and Zimmerman)	Creating attractive opportunities for women prevents the loss of talent to other organizations and encourages female representation.	
		Braidotti’s idea of equality through respect for difference and diversity	Cultural shifts toward valuing diverse contributions support inclusive governance practices.	
		Corporate Governance	Active participation of members in the cooperative’s activities.	High male overrepresentation on boards (93.5% male).
		Governance and performance	Promotion of group cohesion, which could facilitate the inclusion of women.	All-male boards in several cooperatives.
Hernández-Nicolás, C. M., Ugedo, J. F. M., & Vera, A. M.	Governing Council, Women, Social Economy, Financial Variables.	Governance in the private sector and cooperatives		Lack of clear incentives to change the gender structure, as male composition does not significantly affect financial performance.
		Cooperative principles		
		“Glass ceiling” (glass ceiling)	Equality legislation and policies: such as Organic Law 3/2007, promotes gender parity in decision-making bodies.	Glass ceiling: Despite greater preparation and education, women face significant barriers in their advancement to leadership positions, commonly referred to as the “glass ceiling.” Cultural, social, and organizational factors that limit promotion opportunities for women in cooperatives.
		Agency theory	Cooperative principles: include nondiscrimination on the basis of gender, which helps to increase female representation on boards.	Traditional roles and female sectors: Women managers in cooperatives tend to be concentrated in traditionally female sectors, such as services, and in smaller cooperatives.
Palomo-Zurdo, R., Gutiérrez-Fernández, M., & Fernández-Torres, Y.	Gender diversity, board of directors, corporate performance, credit unions, profitability, credit union, profitability	Gender diversity in corporate governance.	Education and preparation: In recent decades, women’s preparedness and access to education has improved considerably, making them better equipped for leadership positions.	Inequality in decision making: Female representation in decision-making positions remains low compared to the number of women employed. This imbalance reflects a resistance to integrating women at the highest levels of decision making.
			Trend in younger cooperatives: Younger cooperatives tend to have greater female participation in their governing bodies.	
		Gender differences in leadership and management skills, gender role theory, theories of gender differences in risk aversion and financial decision making, and the “double-edged sword” perspective on the potential negative effects of gender diversity on board performance.	- Cooperative principles and social purposes facilitate women’s participation in leadership roles within cooperatives. - The principle of free membership in cooperatives increases women’s representation on boards of directors.	- Lack of regulation on mandatory gender quotas for board membership, leading to persistent underrepresentation of women. - Male-dominated culture and networks within the credit union sector, which can limit women’s access to leadership opportunities.

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Table 1. (Continued)

Authors	Keywords	Theoretical framework	Factors favoring gender diversity on cooperative boards of directors	Factors hindering gender diversity on cooperative boards of directors
Thapa, B. K.	Cooperative, governance, membership, political	Cooperative principles and values governance	- Implementation of laws and regulations that guarantee equal participation of both sexes.	- Gender imbalances in employment, employment status and income that disadvantage women.
			- Training and education programs adapted to the needs of women to enhance their leadership roles.	- Cultural norms and lack of awareness of women's rights and role in cooperatives.
			- Balanced participation of men and women in management positions.	- Significant underrepresentation of women on cooperative boards of directors, where they hold only 23.94% of the seats.
			- Integrate gender issues into all cooperative policies and strategies.	- Lower participation of women in cooperative activities such as annual general assemblies.
			- Encourage the professionalization and empowerment of women in cooperatives.	- Gender imbalance in cooperative employment, with women occupying only 17.33% of jobs.
Esteban-Salvador, L., Gargallo-Castel, A., & Pérez-Sanz, J.	Presidents	Gender diversity in senior management	International cooperative values and principles promote gender equality in decision-making.	High level of indebtedness: Cooperatives with higher levels of indebtedness tend to be less likely to have a woman president. This could be related to risk aversion, as women tend to be more conservative in terms of financial decision making.
	Gender diversity	Theories of corporate governance	The International Cooperative Alliance (ICA) prioritizes gender equality as a global strategy.	
	Cooperatives	Agency theory, resource dependency and gender role theory	Formal Spanish regulations on gender equality require female participation on company boards of directors.	Longer time since appointment of the president: Cooperatives where the president has been in office longer are less likely to be chaired by a woman. This may reflect a resistance to change and the perpetuation of traditional power structures, where men have historically dominated leadership roles.
	Social economy		Cooperatives' corporate social responsibility measures support gender equality.	
	Spain		A higher liquidity ratio and a higher percentage of women employed in cooperatives increase the likelihood of female leadership.	
Hernández-Nicolás, C. M., Martín-Ugedo, J. F., & Mínguez-Vera, A.	Cooperatives, debt, gender, profitability	Study of the presence of women on Boards of Directors	The principle of voluntary and open membership prohibits gender discrimination, which facilitates women's participation.	Persistence of discrimination in cooperatives
		Unified Code of Good Governance	ICA guidelines promote the absence of gender-based barriers and encourage equal participation in leadership programs.	Traditional roles and smaller cooperatives for women
		Cooperative principles	Social pressure in Europe to include women in senior management positions acts as a cultural enabler.	Low proportion of women in decision-making positions
		Gender diversity in the company's decision making group	Gender equality legislation in Spain establishes a regulatory framework that promotes gender diversity.	
		Agency theory, resource dependence, human capital and social psychology theory	Increased female representation improves working conditions and balance, highlighting the benefits of inclusive governance.	

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Table 1. (Continued)

Authors	Keywords	Theoretical framework	Factors favoring gender diversity on cooperative boards of directors	Factors hindering gender diversity on cooperative boards of directors
Hernández-Ortiz, M. J., Martí, E. G., Jiménez, R. M., Ortega, C. P., & Jiménez, C. R.	Gender diversity; Women; Governing Councils; Agrifood Cooperative Societies; Profitability	Agency theory, resource dependence theory, institutional theory or stakeholder theory.	Social and legal pressures for ethical and socially committed attitudes promote gender diversity.	Large underrepresentation of women on cooperative boards of directors: they represent only 13.15% of board members.
			Cooperatives provide opportunities for the personal and professional development of rural women.	Women hold very few management positions, only 7.64% of board chairs and 11.76% of board secretaries.
			Cooperative principles of voluntary and open membership and democratic participation encourage women's participation.	Women play a secondary role in these organizations due to their underrepresentation and lack of power.
			Increasing the presence of women on boards of directors could lead to better performance due to the diversity of management skills and perspectives.	Noncompliance with the gender parity requirements established by the Spanish Equality Law, as only 9.27% of the cooperatives' governing boards reach the required level of gender balance.
Meira, D., Luísa Martinho, A., & Castro, C.	Gender equality, Cooperatives, Cooperative principles, Gender equality, Formal equality, Women's participation	Democratic and representative governance of cooperatives	The legal framework for cooperatives in Portugal inherently supports gender equality.	Although the legal regime of cooperatives emphasizes equality as a fundamental value, there may be barriers to achieving gender equality in practice within cooperatives in Portugal.
		Cooperative principles and values	The principles of democratic management and open membership facilitate women's participation in management roles.	While formal equality may exist in the legislation and internal regulations of cooperatives, the study aims to investigate whether constructed gender equality exists in practice.
			Cooperatives actively suppress discriminatory practices, creating an enabling environment for women.	The data reveal a clear hierarchy in the participation of women, who have a greater presence in voluntary work compared to paid work, and another hierarchy within paid work between women who are not members of the cooperative and those who are.
			Efforts are being made to facilitate women's access to management positions in cooperatives.	
Coba, E. M., et al.	Equity, gender, banks, cooperatives, financial performance, Ecuador	Board gender diversity	Cooperative principles and norms that emphasize equality, solidarity, and nondiscrimination.	Organizational dynamics dominated by men and traditional leadership styles that limit women's access to top roles.
		Broader perspectives	National legal and regulatory support (Ley Orgánica de Economía Popular y Solidaria; SEPS policies) that encourage inclusion.	Cultural and social barriers including gender roles, religious or cultural norms, and expectations about family responsibilities.
		Corporate social responsibility	Organizational culture in cooperatives that can better accommodate work–family balance and participatory governance.	Tokenism or symbolic inclusion where appointments do not translate into real decision-making power.
				Economic and bureaucratic barriers (lack of property titles or collateral, documentation requirements) that reduce women's financial inclusion and pipeline into leadership.

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Table 1. (Continued)

Authors	Keywords	Theoretical framework	Factors favoring gender diversity on cooperative boards of directors	Factors hindering gender diversity on cooperative boards of directors
Périlleux, A., & Szafarz, A.	Gender, board of directors, trickle-down theory, CEO, performance, leadership	Trickle-down theory	The cooperative nature and democratic election process facilitates the participation of women in leadership positions.	Lack of direct control by local cooperative boards over the appointment and promotion of CEOs, which is centralized at the network level.
		Literature on gender differences in leadership styles	The UM-PAMECAS network's focus on female participation encourages gender diversity.	Possible bias or preference for placing male CEOs in cooperatives with female-dominated boards, which limits the ability to achieve gender balance in leadership.
		Literature on corporate finance	The Senegalese government's legal framework empowers female borrowers and supports gender diversity.	Absence of explicit gender quotas or other policies that mandate or incentivize greater female representation on boards.
		Gender quotas	The high prevalence of women in leadership positions indicates supportive organizational practices.	
		Model-based leadership theory	External support from international organizations such as Canadian NGOs increases female participation.	
		Transformational leadership	Women board members exercise inspirational leadership over their staff, based on role modeling and gender affinity.	
Bastida, M., Oliveira, A., & Vázquez-Tain, M. A.	Collective entrepreneurship, cooperative enterprises, women entrepreneurship	Cooperatives as drivers of entrepreneurship and equality	Adherence to cooperative principles: Values such as democracy, equality, solidarity, and the primacy of people align with many women's motivations and expectations, making governance roles in cooperatives more accessible.	Stereotypes and lower self-confidence: Individual-level factors such as reduced self-confidence and gender biases in leadership evaluation reduce female candidacies and appointments.
			Work-life balance measures and family-friendly policies: Internal policies that facilitate reconciliation of work and family life make it more feasible for women to take on demanding governance roles.	Adverse cultural and institutional context: In contexts that are culturally or institutionally unsupportive of women, the cooperative model alone may not be sufficient to ensure gender-diverse boards
			Institutional support and a favorable ecosystem: Access to advisory services, financing, and a supportive institutional environment encourages women to assume leadership positions.	

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Table 1. (Continued)

Authors	Keywords	Theoretical framework	Factors favoring gender diversity on cooperative boards of directors	Factors hindering gender diversity on cooperative boards of directors
Hansen, H. O., & Asmild, M.	Diversity, barriers, external board members, gender, recruiting group, agriculture, representativeness	Gender diversity and women's representation in farmer-owned agricultural cooperatives	- The appointment of female external members increases women's representation on boards. - Cooperatives' diversity policies and explicit gender diversity objectives support female participation. - Setting explicit and specific gender diversity targets encourages inclusive governance practices.	Institutional barriers in the form of cooperative bylaws that restrict board membership to farmers, who are predominantly male, limiting the pool of potential female board members. Cultural and historical barriers, as agriculture and agricultural cooperatives have traditionally been male-dominated, creating a difficult environment for increasing female representation on boards. Structural barriers in the form of a declining recruitment pool of cooperative members due to the decline in the number of farmers, which disproportionately affects women given their already low representation in the sector.
García Companys, A.	Equality, diversity, gender, cooperatives, cooperative identity, cooperative identity, legislation	Key concepts of equality and diversity	Implementation of policies in cooperatives to promote female participation. Establishment of an adequate regulatory framework to promote gender diversity. Broadening the social base to include more women as legitimate members. Conscious self-regulation of cooperatives to support gender equality. Promotion of gender diversity as a value-added factor in the governance of cooperatives.	Lack of clear legal requirements for gender-balanced representation on cooperative boards, with only a general obligation to "strive for" balanced representation.
		Equality and diversity as part of the cooperative identity		The principle of self-management in cooperatives, where board members must be members, which may limit gender diversity if members are predominantly male in certain sectors.
		Spanish cooperative laws		Homogeneity of the membership base in some sectors, which makes it difficult to establish mandatory gender balance or parity measures on boards.
García-Martí, E., Hernández-Ortiz, M. J., Ruiz-Jiménez, M. del C., Pedrosa-Ortega, C., & Martínez-Jiménez, R.	Women, Agri-food cooperatives, leadership, business sustainability, business sustainability	Gender diversity and sustainability	Cooperative values that promote gender equality and democratic decision-making facilitate women's participation in leadership roles.	Vertical segregation, as women's representation on cooperative boards is very low, despite the fact that they represent about 30% of cooperative members.
		Female leadership on boards of directors	Increasing the number of women on boards aligns practices with stakeholder demands, fostering inclusive governance.	Challenges in the rural context, such as male-dominated activities, difficulties in accessing employment and services, and low female representation in leadership positions, which create additional obstacles for women to participate in agricultural activities and lead cooperatives.
		Social role theory	Recognizing the additional benefits women bring to decision-making processes encourages their inclusion on boards.	Gender bias and discrimination, as women have to demonstrate more to achieve the same positions as men and face greater expectations and scrutiny.

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Table 1. (Continued)

Authors	Keywords	Theoretical framework	Factors favoring gender diversity on cooperative boards of directors	Factors hindering gender diversity on cooperative boards of directors
Meliá-Martí, E., Tormo-Carbó, G., & Fernández-Guadano, J.	Gender diversity Critical mass Motivational role modeling theory Social economy enterprises	Female leadership and sustainability in cooperative enterprises	Training is a key aspect observed in women chairwomen, in addition to the majority having a university education, they are all open to continuing education in agricultural matters	
		Leadership styles, transformational leadership	Having women in management positions can encourage new generations of women to take on management roles in the company.	
		Board gender diversity and firm performance	Legal and regulatory pressures: laws and quotas such as the EU directive encourage the appointment of women to boards.	Strong male dominance in the sector — the historical and majority male composition of boards, around 99% in 2017, creates structural barriers to women's entry and influence.
		Moderator effect of FCEO and Fchair	Internal equality policies: adoption of equality policies in cooperatives increased over the study period and facilitates greater female representation.	
			Female leaders as role models: the presence of a female board chair acts as a role model, motivating other women and enabling diversity to produce positive effects; the study finds a moderating effect of a female chair.	Absence or insufficiency of reinforcing policies: isolated numerical increases in female representation without institutional support and visible female leadership do not guarantee improved performance.
Ugur-Cinar, M., Cinar, K., Onculer-Yayalar, E., & Akyuz, S.	Family constraints, social class, social reproduction, state, Turkey, women's cooperatives, women's cooperatives	1. Feminism of social reproduction	Economic and social empowerment platforms for women.	Family restrictions and social reproduction duties.
		2. Varied theory of social reproduction	Solidarity networks among cooperatives.	Government policies that promote informal production and limit access to social security.
		3. Feminist political economy	Training and advice offered by organizations such as the Foundation for the Support of Women's Work.	High tax burdens that affect the financial viability of cooperatives.
			Improvement of the social and economic status of participating women.	Lack of adequate institutional and legal support for women's cooperatives.
Vázquez Ruano, T.	Cooperative, Governing Board, gender parity, principle of equality	International Cooperative Alliance (ICA) Cooperative Principles	- The implementation of a special equality commission encourages gender diversity on cooperative boards.	The underrepresentation of women in cooperative membership as a whole, representing only 8.6%.
		Principle of democratic management and participation in cooperatives	- Ensuring equal treatment and opportunities among members facilitates women's participation in leadership roles.	Significant imbalance between men and women in management positions: women hold only 9% of board positions, 4.5% of chairmanships, and 13.5% of management positions.
		Principle of equality and nondiscrimination in cooperatives	- Reinforcing the principles of education, training and information improves women's preparation for leadership roles.	Persistence of cultural and structural barriers that limit women's participation and representation in cooperative governance.

(Continued)

Table 1. (Continued)

Authors	Keywords	Theoretical framework	Factors favoring gender diversity on cooperative boards of directors	Factors hindering gender diversity on cooperative boards of directors
Marlier, Z., & Dufays, F.	Boards of directors, care work, cooperatives, gender relations, women	(Directive (EU) 2022/2381)	- Regulatory measures that consider lack of attention to equality as a disqualifying factor encourage inclusive governance practices.	The principle of gender equality is not explicitly contemplated in national cooperative regulations, which reflects the imbalances in this area.
		Draft bill of the Integral Law of measures to promote the social economy	- Adaptation to EU guidelines such as Directive (EU) 2022/2381 supports gender equality policies.	
		Gender relations	Cooperative values: equality and democratic principles (e.g., one person = one vote) that foster a more inclusive culture.	Patriarchal structures: broader social norms and power relations that shape opportunities inside and outside cooperatives.
		Patriarchal ontology	Personal support: partner support or external care that frees time for voluntary governance.	Care burden and motherhood: unpaid domestic responsibilities and career interruptions limiting availability.
Martínez-León, I. M., Olmedo-Cifuentes, I., Sánchez-Navarro, J. L., & Arcas-Lario, N.	Board gender diversity, organizational performance, transformational leadership	Glass ceiling	Meeting flexibility: scheduling and parental consideration that facilitate participation by caregivers.	Male-dominated sectors: limited candidate pools and reinforced stereotypes in certain industries.
		Tokenism/critical mass	Local awareness and initiatives: some cooperatives adopt conscious recruitment or diversity efforts.	Informal recruitment networks: male-dominated networks and co-optation that reproduce existing compositions.
		Transformational leadership in SEEs	Cooperative values: The participatory nature and the “one member, one vote” principle make SEEs more likely to promote gender equality and include women in decision-making bodies.	Lack of policies/quotas for SMEs and SEEs: Small and medium cooperatives are not subject to the same board-composition rules as large firms, limiting formal mechanisms to promote diversity.
		Transformational leadership and organizational performance		
Ward, A. M., Forker, J., & Reilly, B.	Cooperatives; credit unions; identity; internal governance; religion; fields; women on boards	Board gender diversity, leadership and organizational performance	Alignment with social objectives: Prioritizing collective goals and social responsibility increases the value placed on women’s roles, reinforcing inclusion and equity.	Tokenism and proportion effects: When women are a minority their views may be undervalued; both underrepresentation and overrepresentation can reduce women’s influence
			Styles and competencies attributed to women: Women tend to foster a collaborative culture, information sharing, and closer oversight, which can improve decision-making and reduce opportunistic behavior.	Gender stereotypes and cultural context: Perceptions about gender roles and organizational culture affect how female leadership is received, potentially generating resistance or limiting impact.
		Strategic Action Field	Affiliation to the ILCU: explicit policy promoting female representation; ILCU credit unions show higher percentages of women.	Conservative religious identity and associational common bond restrict membership and reproduce patriarchal norms, linking to lower female representation.
		Collective identity	Cooperative identity and residential common bond: greater openness and growth potential that support diversity.	Larger cooperative size: correlated negatively with the percentage of women on boards.
		Institutional theory		Institutional inertia and field stability: gender composition remained statistically stable over time, indicating path dependence and resistance to change.
		Identity economics		

Table 2 Search strategy using PCC framework (Population–Concept–Context)

PCC element	Operationalization in this review	Search terms (Boolean syntax)	Search field	Databases
Population	Board members in cooperative enterprises	(board* OR governance OR "board of directors")	Title, Abstract, Keywords	Web of Science, Scopus
Concept	Descriptors typically employed in empirical studies to address women's presence on boards	("gender diversity" OR women OR female*)	Title, Abstract, Keywords	Web of Science, Scopus
Context	Cooperatives as democratic enterprises	cooperative*	Title, Abstract, Keywords	Web of Science, Scopus

operationalized and reported participation in heterogeneous and often noncomparable ways, we did not extract participation rates (e.g., percentages) as a standardized variable across studies; instead, the synthesis maps the determinants reported as enabling or constraining women's participation on cooperative boards.

Search strategy and data sources

Searches were conducted in two bibliographic databases, Web of Science and Scopus. No date limits and no language restrictions were applied. To restrict retrieval to peer-reviewed empirical work, a document-type filter for Articles was applied in both databases. Iterative subject-area filters and other database limits were also used to reduce retrieval of records from unrelated fields, for example, medicine, psychology, engineering, and biology. Duplicate records were removed prior to title and abstract screening. Full search strategies are reported in Table 2.

Study selection was guided by the PCC framework, which specifies the Population, Concept, and Context, following Peters et al. (2020). Population referred to the populations examined in the included studies: women and men serving as members of cooperative boards. Concept referred to descriptors used in the literature to address women's presence on boards. Context encompassed cooperative enterprises across sectors and countries, understood as democratically controlled organizations in line with the International Cooperative Alliance definition (2015). Empirical studies reporting primary or secondary data, using quantitative, qualitative, or mixed methods, and published in peer-reviewed journals were eligible for inclusion. Table 3 shows the criteria of inclusion and exclusion, aligned with PCC framework and PRISMA-ScR.

Search terms targeted three complementary dimensions: cooperatives, gender-related descriptors, and governance bodies. The final search strings used in each database were as follows:

Web of Science (Topic search): TS = (cooperative* AND ("gender diversity" OR women OR female*) AND (board* OR governance OR "board of directors"))

Scopus (Title/Abstract/Keywords): TITLE-ABS-KEY (cooperative* AND ("gender diversity" OR women OR female*) AND (board* OR governance OR "board of directors"))

The search strategy was developed iteratively through an exploratory identification of relevant descriptors, testing of Boolean combinations, and refinement of strings and filters in response to screening feedback. The overall approach was designed to be systematic and transparent, consistent with methodological guidance for scoping reviews (Peters et al., 2020).

Results

A total of 1375 records were identified through database searches: Web of Science ($n = 894$) and Scopus ($n = 481$). Prior to manual screening, automated subject-area filters excluded 1273 records (Web of Science $n = 845$; Scopus $n = 428$). For example, records indexed in Medicine/Health-related subject areas were excluded after a rapid inspection showed that "cooperative" was frequently used in clinical or behavioral meanings (e.g., patient cooperation) rather than to denote cooperative enterprises; subject-area restrictions were refined iteratively to reduce retrieval from clearly unrelated fields. Next, 37 duplicate records were removed, leaving 65 records for title and abstract screening. During title and abstract screening, 43 records were excluded for failing to meet

Table 3 Inclusion and exclusion criteria aligned with PCC framework and PRISMA-ScR

Criterion	Inclusion	Exclusion	Justification
Document type	Peer-reviewed journal articles	Books, book chapters, theses, conference abstracts, reports	Ensure methodological quality and comparability across studies
Topic relevance (scope)	Articles addressing gender diversity and/or women/female presence in governance boards of cooperatives	Articles on cooperatives without governance boards; boards not in cooperatives; gender in cooperatives without board focus; board diversity without a gender focus	Ensure direct relevance to the research question
Empirical grounding	Articles providing empirical evidence or systematic analysis	Purely theoretical essays without empirical basis	Ensure evidence-based synthesis
Database coverage	Indexed in Scopus or Web of Science	Nonindexed or nonpeer-reviewed sources	Increase reliability and transparency of the corpus
Subject areas	Social sciences, economics, business, environmental studies, multidisciplinary	Health, medicine, biology, engineering, etc.	Exclude records from unrelated fields

the predefined PCC criteria. Common reasons for exclusion at this stage included: the term *cooperative* being used as a verb rather than to denote cooperative enterprises; studies addressing forms of diversity other than gender; articles that discussed gender but did not examine the Population of interest (i.e., current or prospective members of cooperative boards); and studies not focused on board composition or governance in cooperatives. Among these were papers that did not correspond exactly to scientific articles, such as conference abstracts, or that did not provide relevant information for the research. This resulted in 22 publications that met all eligibility criteria. In addition, complementary searches identified three additional eligible peer-reviewed journal articles not retrieved in the database search: Meira et al. (2020) and Thapa (2017), located through targeted Google Scholar searches, and Huang et al. (2015), identified through backward citation searching (cited by Meliá-Martí et al., 2024). Cohen's Kappa index (Cohen, 1960) reached a value of 0.935, indicating near-perfect agreement between reviewers. In total, 25 articles were included in the review: 22 retrieved directly from databases and 3 identified through complementary searches (Figure 1).

Descriptive results

The selected articles are presented in Table 4.

The annual distribution of the selected articles is presented in Figure 2, showing an increase in the years 2022 and 2025.

Figure 3 shows the journals with the highest number of publications, with CIRIEC-Spain having the most publications ($n = 4$, 16%), followed by *Annals of Public and Cooperative Economics* and

REVESCO ($n = 3$, 12% each) and VOLUNTAS and *Gender, Work & Organization* ($n = 2$, 8% each).

Figure 4 shows that Spain concentrates the majority of contributions ($n = 13$), followed by Ireland ($n = 2$). All other countries appear with a single published study each: United States, Norway, Malaysia, Nepal, Senegal, Denmark, Portugal, Turkey, Belgium, and Ecuador.

As detailed in Table 1, the studies differ in cooperative type and methodological approach. Most focus on agricultural and agri-food cooperatives in Spain, while others examine credit unions and financial cooperatives, with fewer addressing multisectoral or service cooperatives. Methodologically, the sample includes quantitative designs such as econometric analyses of financial and governance indicators, qualitative studies including interviews, case studies, and document analysis, and a small number of mixed methods. This heterogeneity shows that research on gender diversity in cooperative boards remains fragmented, concentrated in certain sectors and regions, and underscores the need for broader comparative and cross-sectoral investigations.

Content analysis based on the Stone and Colella framework

Building on Stone and Colella's (1996) framework, the findings of the review were clustered into four thematic areas that mirror these multilevel influences. This analytical step allowed us to group the evidence in a way that reflects the interplay between personal, organizational, and environmental/legal factors, thereby providing a theoretically grounded rationale for the clustering (Tables 5 and 6). The evidence suggests that no single dimension accounts

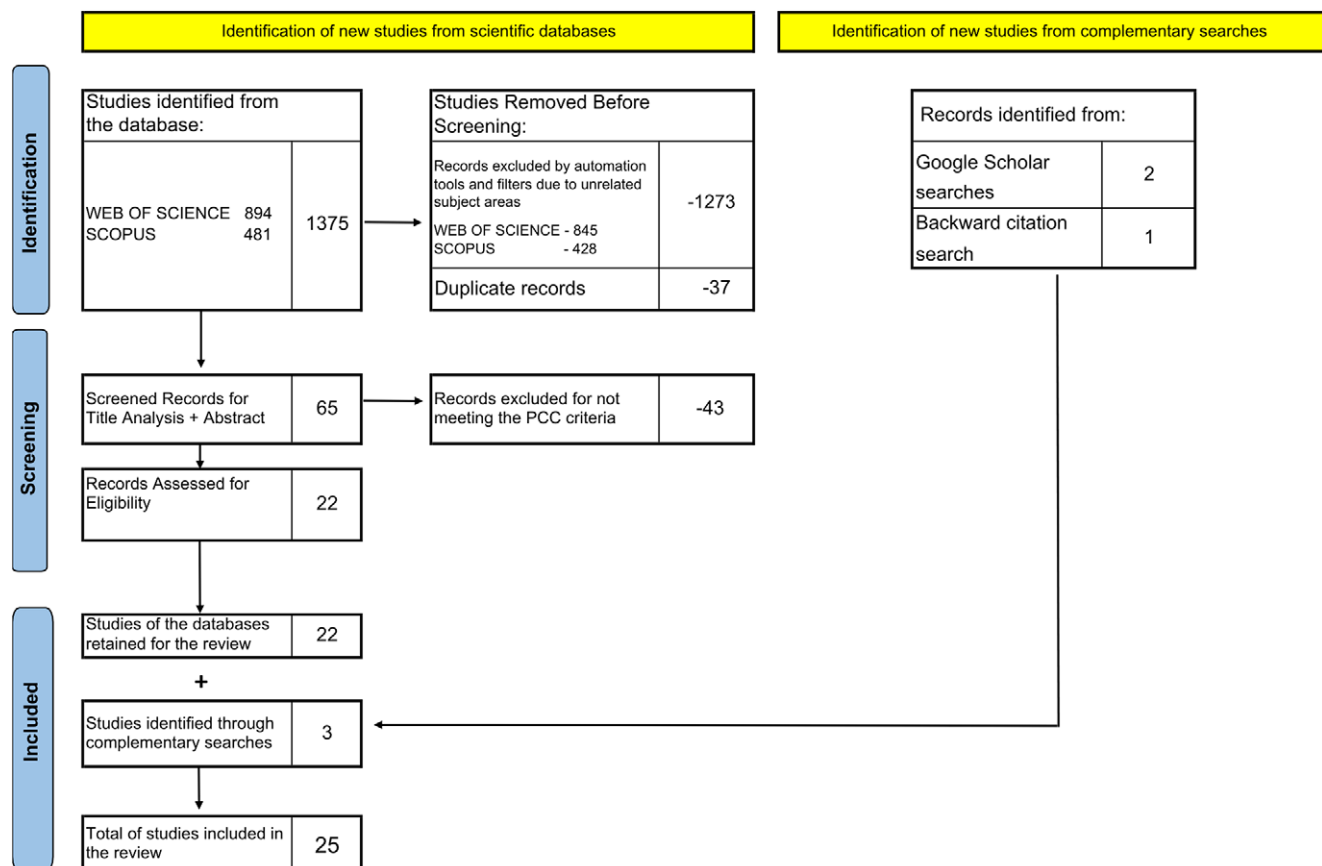


Fig. 1. Prisma-ScR diagram.

Table 4 Articles selected for the review

No.	Authors	Year	Title	Journal
1	McKillop, D. G., Briscoe, R., McCarthy, O., Ward, M., & Ferguson, C.	2003	Irish credit unions: Exploring the gender mix	<i>VOLUNTAS: International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organizations</i>
2	de Cabo, R. M., del Campo, J. I., & Nogués, R. G.	2009	La participación financiera y el papel de la mujer en la toma de decisiones de las sociedades cooperativas: Los consejos de administración	<i>Revista Europea de Dirección y Economía de la Empresa</i>
3	Esteban-Salvador, M. L.	2013	Are the cooperatives in more favourable of having women in their board of directors than other entities?	<i>REVESCO: Revista de Estudios Cooperativos</i>
4	Bezboruah, K. C., & Pillai, V.	2015	Exploring the participation of women in financial cooperatives and credit unions in developing countries	<i>VOLUNTAS: International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organizations</i>
5	Brandth, B., & Bjørkhaug, H.	2015	Gender quotas for agricultural boards: Changing constructions of gender?	<i>Gender, Work & Organization</i>
6	Huang, C., Zazale, S., Othman, R., Aris, N., & Ariff, S. M.	2015	Influence of cooperative members' participation and gender on performance	<i>Journal of Southeast Asian Research</i>
7	Hernández-Nicolás, C. M., Martín-Ugedo, J. F., & Mínguez-Vera, A.	2016	The influence of gender in the direction of Spanish cooperative societies on profitability and indebtedness: An empirical analysis	<i>REVESCO: Revista de Estudios Cooperativos</i>
8	Palomo-Zurdo, R., Gutiérrez-Fernández, M., & Fernández-Torres, Y.	2017	The gender issue at the boards of directors of co-operative banks	<i>CIRIEC-España</i>
9	Thapa, B. K.	2017	Gender issues in cooperative societies of Ilam	<i>Journal of Advanced Academic Research</i>
10	Esteban-Salvador, L., Gargallo-Castel, A., & Pérez-Sanz, J.	2019	The presidency of the governing boards of cooperatives in Spain: A gendered approach	<i>Journal of Co-Operative Organization and Management</i>
11	Hernández-Nicolás, C. M., Martín-Ugedo, J. F., & Mínguez-Vera, A.	2019	The effect of gender diversity on the board of Spanish agricultural cooperatives on returns and debt: An empirical analysis	<i>Agribusiness</i>
12	Meira, D., Martinho, A. L., & Castro, C.	2020	(Des)igualdade de género nos órgãos das cooperativas portuguesas: Uma análise exploratória	<i>Gestão e Sociedade</i>
13	Hernández-Ortiz, M. J., et al.	2020	The effect of gender diversity on the performance of Spanish agri-food cooperatives	<i>REVESCO: Revista de Estudios Cooperativos</i>
14	Périlleux, A., & Szafarz, A.	2022	Women in the boardroom: A bottom-up approach to the trickle-down effect	<i>Small Business Economics</i>
15	Coba, E. M., et al.	2022	Gender diversity and performance in the Ecuadorian financial sector	<i>Revista Finanzas y Política Económica</i>
16	Hansen, H. O., & Asmild, M.	2023	Women's participation on the boards of farmer-owned cooperatives	<i>Frontiers in Veterinary Science</i>
17	Bastida, M., Oliveira, A., & Vázquez-Taín, M. A.	2023	Are cooperatives gender sensitive? A confirmatory and predictive analysis of women's collective entrepreneurship	<i>Annals of Public and Cooperative Economics</i>
18	García-Comanys, A.	2024	La diversidad de género como instrumento de buen gobierno en las cooperativas	<i>CIRIEC-España</i>
19	García-Martí, E., et al.	2024	Liderazgo femenino en los consejos y respuesta corporativa a la sostenibilidad	<i>CIRIEC-España</i>
20	Ugur-Cinar, M., et al.	2024	The political economy of women's cooperatives in Turkey: A social reproduction perspective	<i>Gender, Work & Organization</i>
21	Vázquez Ruano, T.	2024	Propósitos reglamentarios sobre la igualdad de género en la gestión cooperativa	<i>CIRIEC-España</i>
22	Meliá-Martí, E., Tormo-Carbó, G., & Fernández-Guadano, J.	2024	Board gender diversity and employee productivity: The moderating role of female leaders	<i>European Research on Management and Business Economics</i>
23	Martínez-León, I. M., Olmedo-Cifuentes, I., Sánchez-Navarro, J. L., & Arcas-Lario, N.	2025	Transformational leadership and performance in social economy entities: The moderating effect of board gender diversity	<i>Annals of Public and Cooperative Economics</i>
24	Marlier, Z., & Dufays, F.	2025	(In)Equality and commitments: Women on cooperatives' boards of directors in Belgium	<i>Annals of Public and Cooperative Economics</i>
25	Ward, A. M., Forker, J., & Reilly, B.	2025	Strategic action field theory: Explaining variation in the percentage of women on boards in credit unions	<i>Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly</i>

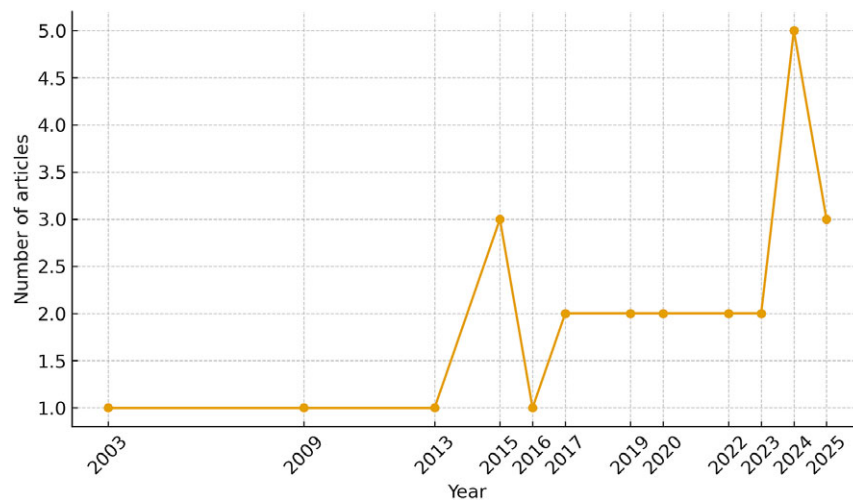


Fig. 2. Articles per year.

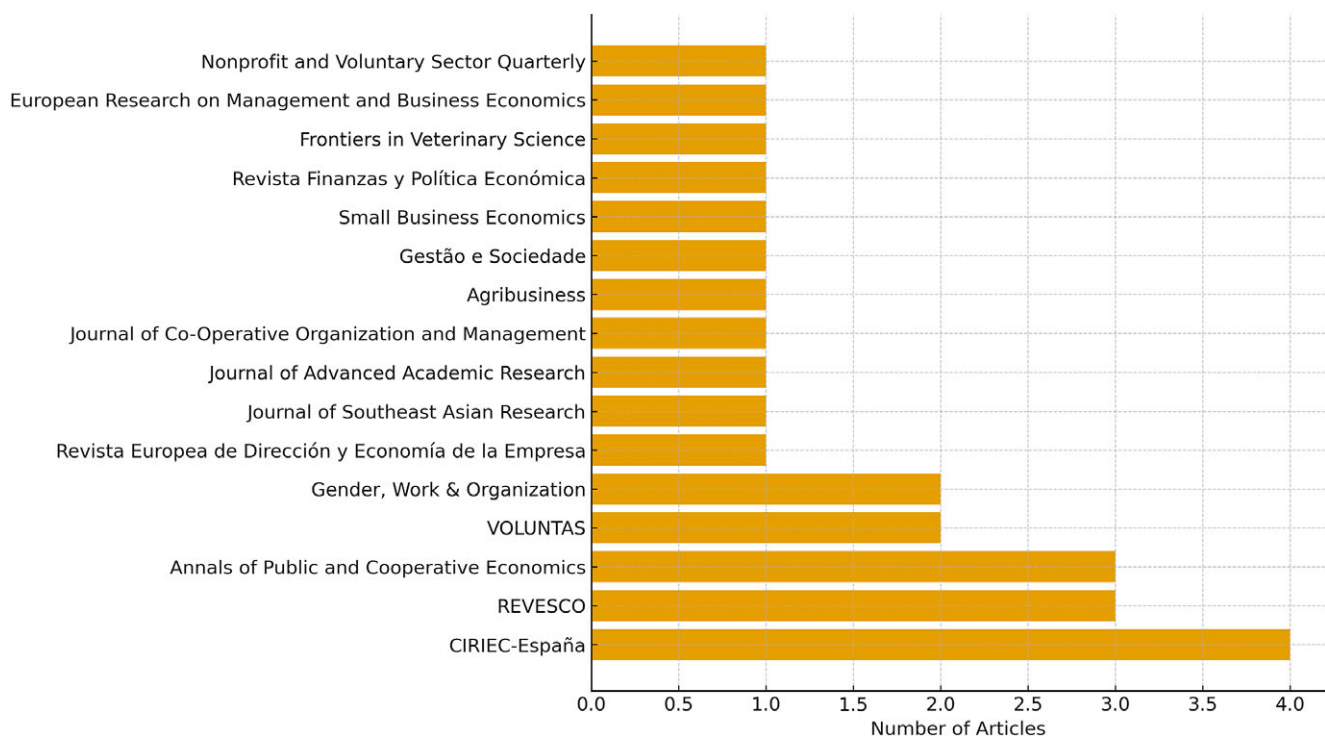


Fig. 3. Articles per journal.

for women's inclusion or exclusion; rather, mechanisms at multiple levels co-occur and reinforce one another. Illustrative excerpts from the reviewed articles, along with their respective coding, are provided in Table 7 to enhance transparency of the analytical procedure. These represent a selection of examples intended to illustrate the process, rather than an exhaustive account of all coded material.

To illustrate, Hansen and Asmild (2023) describe how internal eligibility rules can restrict women's entry into boards: "only farmers have the right to become board members, and the overwhelming majority of farmers are men," resulting in a limited recruitment pool for women (p. 2). This excerpt was coded as an organizational factor (internal policies and regulations: restrictive bylaws) hindering

women's participation. In contrast, Périlleux and Szafarz (2022) highlight a multiplier effect of women's leadership: "Female employees view their female directors as role models," which can increase motivation and productivity (p. 1783). This excerpt was coded as a personal factor (individual attributes of women: female leadership) favoring women's participation.

At the *personal level*, managerial training and experience (Hernández-Ortiz et al., 2020; Meira et al., 2020), networking opportunities (García-Martí et al., 2024) were frequently reported as enablers, while the need for women to demonstrate higher levels of competence than men (García-Martí et al., 2024; Thapa, 2017) and the internalization of stereotypes (Hernández-Nicolás et al., 2016;

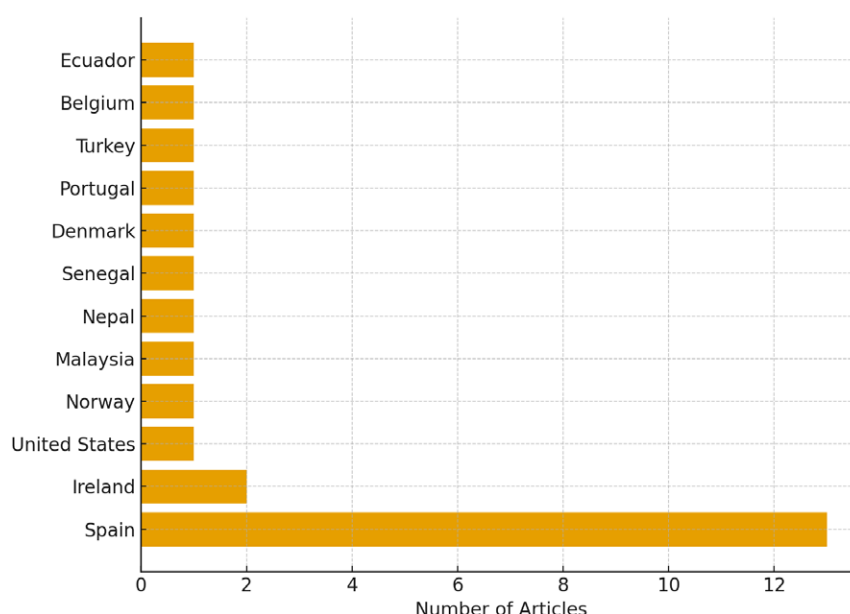


Fig. 4. Articles per country.

McKillop et al., 2003) were recurrent barriers. These dual narratives illustrate how capacity-building initiatives coexist with persistent doubts about women's legitimacy in leadership roles.

Among *observers and decision makers*, recognition of the value of women's leadership (Meira et al., 2020) and awareness of diversity emerged as enablers (García-Martí et al., 2024), whereas gendered expectations about family roles (García-Martí et al., 2024; Thapa, 2017; Vázquez Ruano, 2024), vertical segregation and the glass ceiling (Brandth & Bjørkhaug, 2015; Coba et al., 2022; Hernández Nicolás et al., 2016) remained significant obstacles.

At the *organizational level*, democratic cooperative principles (Esteban-Salvador, 2013; Hernández-Nicolás et al., 2019; McKillop et al., 2003; Ward et al., 2025), work–family reconciliation and flexibility policies (Bastida et al., 2023; Marlier & Dufays, 2025) and recruitment practices shaping board composition (Hansen & Asmild, 2023) were noted as facilitators. Barriers included the masculinization of certain sectors (García-Martí et al., 2024; Meliá-Martí et al., 2024), female tokenism—symbolic inclusion of women without substantive voice (Coba et al., 2022; Meliá-Martí et al., 2024), restrictive bylaws, prolonged succession processes, and organizational cultures dominated by male norms (Esteban-Salvador et al., 2019; Hansen & Asmild, 2023; Palomo-Zurdo et al., 2017). Evidence regarding cooperative size and professionalization was contradictory: while some studies linked larger and more professionalized cooperatives with greater female representation (García-Martí et al., 2024; Hansen & Asmild, 2023; Meira et al., 2020), others found larger cooperatives associated with fewer women in governance (Bezboruah & Pillai, 2015; De Cabo et al., 2009; McKillop et al., 2003; Ward et al., 2025).

At the *environmental/legal level*, quota legislation (Brandth & Bjørkhaug, 2015; Coba et al., 2022; García Companys, 2024; Vázquez Ruano, 2024), support networks (García-Martí et al., 2024; Marlier & Dufays, 2025; Ugur-Cinar et al., 2024), and public training initiatives (Thapa, 2017; Ugur-Cinar et al., 2024) were seen as enablers. Conversely, the absence or weak enforcement of public policies (Bastida et al., 2023; Ugur-Cinar et al., 2024), the limited awareness of women's rights within cooperatives (Thapa, 2017;

Ugur-Cinar et al., 2024) and structural gender inequality (Bastida et al., 2023; Marlier & Dufays, 2025) constrained participation.

These findings are further elaborated in the Discussion, where we consider how multilevel dynamics interact and how cooperatives compare with other organizational forms.

Discussion

This study categorized factors that favor or hinder gender diversity on cooperative boards, using Stone and Colella's (1996) model as reference. The results not only expand existing knowledge by incorporating cooperative perspectives but also reveal a paradox. Although cooperatives are grounded in democracy and equity, women still face barriers to full participation. This ambiguity places cooperatives in an intermediate position within the nonprofit sector, expected to model inclusion yet often reproducing exclusion found elsewhere.

In terms of personal factors, management training, mentoring networks, and collaborative leadership style are determining aspects that favor female inclusion on boards of directors (García-Martí et al., 2024; Hernández-Nicolás et al., 2016; Meira et al., 2020). Brandth and Bjørkhaug (2015) and García-Martí et al. (2024) also emphasize the importance of training and mentoring programs to strengthen women's self-confidence and expand their opportunities for access to governance. However, critical scholarship warns against framing such initiatives as sufficient solutions. Ely and Meyerson (2000) describe this orientation as the “fix-the-women” approach, in which organizational change efforts focus on adapting women to existing structures rather than transforming those structures. This perspective converges with Acker's (1990) influential formulation that organizational structures are not gender neutral and that gender is an integral part of organizational processes. Together, these contributions caution against approaches that place the burden of change on women alone, instead of addressing the organizational practices and cultural norms that sustain inequality.

However, significant personal barriers persist related to women's need to demonstrate superior skills to their male peers and the

Table 5 Factors favoring gender diversity on cooperative boards of directors

Category (Stone & Colella, 1996)	Subcategory	Factor	Description	Authors (and year)
Personal factors	Individual attributes of women	Management training and experience	Education and vocational training are critical to prepare women for leadership roles	Hernández-Ortiz et al. (2020); Meira et al. (2020).
		Networking and mentoring	Mentoring programs help increase confidence and expand opportunities for women	García-Martí et al. (2024)
		Female leaders as a role model	Female leadership has a multiplier effect, motivating more women to participate on boards.	García-Martí et al. (2024); Meliá-Martí et al. (2024); Périlleux and Szafarz (2022)
		Female work style	Adaptation of women's work style to the cooperative structure facilitates their inclusion in decision-making bodies.	Hernández-Ortiz et al. (2020)
	Attributes of the observers (decision makers on boards)	Diversity and inclusion awareness	Environments that promote diversity tend to have higher female representation	García-Martí et al. (2024)
		Recognition of the value of female leadership	Women in positions of power generate positive impacts in organizations	Meira et al. (2020)
Organizational factors	Policies, culture, and organizational structure	Democratic structure Cooperative Principles	Democratic structure and cooperative principles of equality promote the inclusion of women in governance bodies.	Coba et al. (2022); Esteban-Salvador (2013); Hernández-Nicolás et al. (2016, 2019); Hernández-Ortiz et al. (2020); Marlier and Dufays (2025); Martínez-León et al. (2025); McKillop et al. (2003); Ward et al. (2025)
		Size and sector of activity	Size and sector of activity influence female representation, being higher in large cooperatives and in sectors such as social solidarity.	García-Martí et al. (2024); Hansen and Asmild (2023); Meira et al. (2020)
		Institutional Support and Management Practices	Explicit policies that ensure that women have equal opportunities to participate at all levels of the organization.	Brandth and Bjørkhaug (2015); Hansen and Asmild (2023); (Hernández-Ortiz et al., 2020); Meliá-Martí et al. (2024); Ward et al. (2025)
		Work–Family reconciliation and flexibility policies	Internal work-life balance policies favor the inclusion of women in leadership.	Bastida et al. (2023); Marlier and Dufays (2025)
		External recruitment	Recruitment of external members increases board diversity.	Hansen and Asmild (2023)
Environmental factors	Legislation and social context	Quota legislation and equality regulations	Legislation and legal quotas promote female representation in governing bodies.	Brandth and Bjørkhaug (2015); Coba et al. (2022); García Company (2024); Hernández- Nicolás et al. (2016, 2019); Meliá-Martí et al. (2024); Vázquez Ruano (2024)
		Support networks	Support networks and associations such as AMCAE make female participation visible and promote it.	García-Martí et al. (2024); Marlier and Dufays (2025); Ugur-Cinar et al. (2024)
		Public policies	Public training and social awareness policies increase the participation of women in the councils.	Thapa (2017); Ugur-Cinar et al. (2024)

existence of self-stereotypes that limit their motivation (Hernández-Nicolás et al., 2016, 2019; McKillop et al., 2003). Along these lines, research by Koenig et al. (2011) argues that male leadership stereotypes prevail in corporate contexts and significantly limit female participation. As Piatak et al. (2022) point out, female leaders in nonprofit and government sectors often face lower perceived legitimacy, especially in environments lacking clear institutional rules, highlighting the influence of implicit bias on organizational

behavior. These findings show how patterns of perception affect access to decision making, creating organizational challenges for equity in recognition and promotion. They also raise questions about justice and fairness, as discussed by Greenwood (2002), who emphasizes that genuine stakeholder inclusion requires not only structural access but also meaningful voice and agency. In contexts where women must overperform to gain access to leadership, organizations risk violating the moral principle of procedural justice.

Table 6 Factors hindering gender diversity on the cooperative boards of directors

Category (Stone & Colella, 1996)	Subcategory	Factor	Description	Authors (and Year)
Personal factors	Individual attributes of women	Need to demonstrate more skills	Women must demonstrate more competencies than men to access leadership roles	García-Martí et al. (2024); Thapa (2017).
		Internalization of gender stereotypes	Internalization of stereotypes about male and female roles reduces women's willingness and perceived self-efficacy to occupy leadership positions. Perception of these as "men's work."	Bastida et al. (2023); Hernández Nicolás et al. (2016, 2019); McKillop et al. (2003)
	Attributes of the observers (decision makers in the councils)	Gender stereotypes	Family and household roles traditionally assigned to women limit their participation	García-Martí et al. (2024); Thapa (2017); Vázquez Ruano (2024)
		Glass ceiling and vertical segregation	Difficulties for women in attaining leadership positions	Brandth and Bjørkhaug (2015); Coba et al. (2022); Hernández Nicolás et al. (2016, 2019)
Organizational factors	Policies, culture, and organizational structure	Masculinization of sectors	Masculinization of traditional sectors of cooperatives (e.g., the agri-food sector), limiting opportunities and generating resistance to female participation on boards.	García-Martí et al. (2024); Hernández-Nicolás et al., (2019); Meliá-Martí et al. (2024); Marlier and Dufays (2025)
		Size and professionalization of cooperatives	Larger cooperatives, where board positions are more professionalized, tend to have fewer women in leadership roles.	Bezboruah and Pillai (2015); De Cabo et al. (2009); McKillop et al. (2003); Ward et al. (2025)
		Female tokenism	Symbolic inclusion of women without substantive voice, influence, or access to key committees.	Coba et al. (2022); Meliá-Martí et al. (2024)
		Organizational culture	Maintenance of traditional organizational structures in which men are preferred for positions of authority, which excludes women	Hernández-Ortiz et al., (2020); Martínez-León et al. (2025); Marlier and Dufays (2025); Meira et al. (2020); Périlleux and Szafarz (2022); Ward et al. (2025)
		Lack of policies to facilitate the reconciliation of work and family life	Inflexible organizational structures or the absence of policies that facilitate the reconciliation between work and family limit women's participation in management positions.	Bezboruah and Pillai (2015); Marlier and Dufays (2025); McKillop et al. (2003); Meliá-Martí et al. (2024) Ugur-Cinar et al. (2024)
		Internal policies and regulations	Restrictive bylaws, lack of quotas and prolonged succession limit access by women	Esteban-Salvador et al. (2019); Hansen and Asmild (2023); Palomo-Zurdo et al. (2017)
Environmental factors	Legislation and social context	Lack of effective public policies	Insufficient public policies to promote women's participation	Bastida et al. (2023); Ugur-Cinar et al. (2024)
		Lack of education and awareness of rights	Women have less access to education on their rights and duties in cooperatives	Thapa (2017); Ugur-Cinar et al. (2024)
		Structural gender inequality	Enduring systemic disparities that allocate opportunities, authority and resources along gender lines.	Bastida et al. (2023); Marlier and Dufays (2025)

Regarding the attributes of observers, the study shows that awareness and explicit recognition of the value of female leadership are fundamental to increase diversity on boards (García-Martí et al., 2024; Meira et al., 2020). This finding reinforces the argument put forward by Ridgeway (2001), who points out how perceptions about gender in positions of authority are deeply rooted in social structures that must be transformed at the cognitive and affective levels to achieve effective change. García-Martí et al. (2024) and Vázquez Ruano (2024) suggest that cognitive biases, such as gender stereotypes, negatively condition selection and promotion decisions, thus limiting the potential for female inclusion in leadership positions. This dynamic illustrates what Schwartz (2005) defines as

a moral silence within organizations, the failure to challenge structural norms that perpetuate inequality even when they conflict with the organization's stated ethical values. Similar gatekeeping effects have been documented in corporate governance, yet cooperatives, due to their explicit democratic ethos, carry an added responsibility to counteract such biases (Camargo Benavides & Ehrenhard, 2021).

Regarding organizational factors, the democratic and participatory structure of cooperatives is highlighted as a facilitating mechanism, consistent with the research of Hernández-Ortiz et al. (2020), Marlier and Dufays (2025), Martínez-León et al. (2025) and Ward et al. (2025). However, Holgersson and Hvenmark (2023) emphasize that even participatory organizations often

Table 7 Illustrative coding examples

Excerpt from reviewed article	Category (Stone & Colella, 1996)	Subcategory	Factor	Analytical note	Direction of influence
"According to their statutes, only farmers have the right to become board members, and the overwhelming majority of farmers are men. This means that the recruitment pool for women is relatively small." (Hansen & Asmild, 2023, p. 2)	Organizational factors	Policies, culture, and organizational structure	Internal policies and regulations	Restrictive bylaws	Hindering
"Esta barrera viene explicada, entre otros, por la situación familiar ... o por los puestos de trabajo considerados tradicionalmente masculinos y femeninos." (Hernández-Nicolás et al., 2016, p. 141)	Personal factors	Individual attributes of women	Internalization of gender stereotypes	Perception of these as "men's work."	Hindering
"Female employees view their female directors as role models, thus gaining increased motivation and achieving greater productivity." (Périlleux & Szafarz, 2022, p. 1783).	Personal factors	Individual attributes of women	Female leadership	Female leadership has a multiplier effect, motivating more women	Favoring
"Cooperatives with ... fewer years since the appointment of the president have a higher probability of belonging to the group of cooperatives with a board chaired by a woman." (Esteban-Salvador et al., 2019, p. 39)	Organizational factors	Policies, culture and organizational structure	Internal policies and regulations	Prolonged succession limit access by women.	Hindering
"...una barrera que dificulta la promoción laboral femenina llamada 'glass ceiling' ('techo de cristal'). (Hernández-Nicolás et al., 2016, p. 141)	Personal factors	Attributes of the observers	Glass ceiling and vertical segregation	Difficulties for women in attaining leadership positions	Hindering

reproduce gendered power dynamics through informal norms and cultural expectations, calling for a deeper interrogation of how gender operates structurally in nonprofit governance. This research also identified the persistence of traditionally masculinized organizational practices, which hinder effective female inclusion (Hernández-Nicolás et al., 2019; Meliá-Martí et al., 2024). This duality has also been observed in publicly traded companies, where organizational culture and management practices play a critical role in the representation of women in senior positions (Adams & Ferreira, 2009; Campbell & Mínguez-Vera, 2008). Likewise, it was evidenced that work-life balance continues to be a significant organizational constraint (Bastida et al., 2023; Marlier & Dufays, 2025), which is consistent with results obtained in corporate contexts (Mensi-Klarbach & Seierstad, 2020). Examples discussed in the literature include flexible meeting schedules, parental leave policies accessible to both men and women, and mechanisms for childcare support (Hansen & Asmild, 2023). Yet these remain unevenly implemented, highlighting the gap between formal principles and actual practices. These results reinforce the importance of observing possible tensions between the formal governance structure and the informal dynamics that shape organizational culture. As Benito-Esteban et al. (2024) demonstrate, gender-diverse boards can contribute, alongside other governance factors, to configurations associated with higher levels of web transparency and accountability, suggesting that gender inclusion plays a role not only in internal dynamics but also in external perceptions of legitimacy.

Finally, in the environmental dimension, legislation and public policies such as gender quotas and specific regulations proved to be

effective instruments to facilitate female representation on cooperative boards (Coba et al., 2022; García Companys, 2024; Meliá-Martí et al., 2024; Vázquez Ruano, 2024), a finding congruent with studies conducted in publicly traded companies (Labelle et al., 2015; Mensi-Klarbach & Seierstad, 2020). However, the effectiveness of these policies depends largely on the sociocultural context and institutional support provided through specialized networks and associations (García-Martí et al., 2024; Ugur-Cinar et al., 2024). This aspect reinforces the thesis of Inglehart and Norris (2003), who argue that gender equality in decision-making structures does not depend solely on legislative changes, but also on profound transformations in culture and social norms. Ortega-Rodríguez et al. (2023) add that board diversity, including gender, is positively correlated with stronger governance mechanisms and better alignment with stakeholder interests, reinforcing the ethical and instrumental value of inclusive leadership. Other studies also point to the lack of education and awareness of rights as a barrier to women's participation in cooperatives, limiting their ability to claim leadership opportunities (Thapa, 2017; Ugur-Cinar et al., 2024). Taken together, these findings resonate with critical contributions in organizational theory. Ely and Meyerson (2000) caution against strategies that adapt women to existing structures rather than transforming them, while Acker (1990) demonstrates how organizational processes themselves are gendered and reproduce exclusion. More recently, Stivers et al. (2023) have advanced the JEDI framework, highlighting the need to frame gender diversity not only as a question of representation or equity but as a broader matter of justice and legitimacy. These perspectives offer a critical lens to understanding persistent barriers in cooperative governance.

One limitation of this study is the absence of an intersectional analysis of gender diversity on cooperative boards. Although barriers and facilitators of female inclusion were examined, the lack of attention to race, class, age, disability, or sexual orientation is both methodological and ethical. Neglecting these dimensions risks reproducing a one-dimensional gender narrative that excludes the most vulnerable women in cooperative governance.

In the context of cooperatives, Camargo Benavides and Ehrenhard (2021) argue that though these enterprises are often idealized as democratic and inclusive, research has given limited attention to how these ideals are implemented in practice. Their findings emphasize the need for further empirical investigation into governance dynamics and representation patterns within cooperative structures. Future research should compare cooperatives with other nonprofit or hybrid organizations, examine intersectional dimensions such as race, class, and age, and assess whether legal reforms create lasting cultural change or only short-term compliance. Another avenue is qualitative studies with women and men in cooperatives to capture perceptions of factors that facilitate or hinder gender inclusion in governance. As Stivers et al. (2023) argue, nonprofit scholarships must also move beyond equity to explicitly address justice as a core dimension of diversity and inclusion. Positioning cooperatives within this JEDI framework underscores both their promise and their responsibility to deliver on the values they claim to embody.

Theoretical and practical implications

The results obtained in this research offer implications from both a theoretical and practical perspective, supported by previous studies that enrich its rationale. From a theoretical point of view, this study extends the model originally proposed by Stone and Colella (1996), applying it to the analysis of gender diversity in cooperative boards. The adaptation demonstrates how personal, observer, organizational, and environmental-legal factors jointly influence women's opportunities for access and permanence in governance. By sitting these domains within cooperatives view, the study provides a contextualized reading of the framework. This theoretical contribution responds to calls in nonprofit scholarship to strengthen research on cooperatives, a field often overlooked despite its relevance as a hybrid organizational form (Camargo Benavides & Ehrenhard, 2021). Cooperative's identity, grounded in equality, open membership, and members' democratic control (ICA, 2015), create strong theoretical expectations: if any organizational form should provide equitable access to leadership for women, it is the cooperative model.

However, this scoping review shows empirical evidence that challenges this assumption. Although cooperatives explicitly commit to equality and democratic governance, empirical evidence shows that structural gender barriers persist, including limited access to decision making, invisibilization of care labor, and masculinized leadership norms (Genta, 2021). If women face such constraints even within organizations designed to ensure democratic participation and equality, it is plausible that similar or more intense barriers operate in other organizational forms with weaker normative commitments to inclusion (Genta, 2021). These findings contribute to theoretical refinement by exposing the limits of participatory governance as a guarantee of gender inclusion. Equitable civil society governance depends not only on values but also on systematic disruption of gendered norms embedded in organizational routines and collective expectations.

From a practical perspective, the findings suggest the need to implement specific measures to promote gender diversity in cooperatives. For example, mentoring programs, a proposal aligned with the results of García-Martí et al. (2024) and Terjesen et al. (2009), and discussed by Brandth and Bjørkhaug (2015), could significantly reduce entry barriers and facilitate the development of women's managerial skills. Likewise, training in female leadership is supported by studies by Adams and Ferreira (2009) and Eagly (2007), who point out that the female collaborative style improves governance and contributes to better performance. At the same time, critical scholarship warns against relying exclusively on training or mentoring, since this can reproduce a "fix the women" logic. More durable change requires modifying organizational structures and routines (Acker, 1990; Ely & Meyerson, 2000).

In terms of institutional design, internal policies must integrate inclusion criteria transversally, specifically throughout selection, promotion, and evaluation phases. Notable mechanisms include transparent nomination protocols, balanced shortlists, and practices for reconciling work and family life that bolster women's access to senior positions. These measures may encompass meeting schedules compatible with family needs, remote work options, parental leave, and childcare support, as evidenced by comparative studies (Mensi-Klarbach & Seierstad, 2020). Finally, aiming for congruence between cooperative principles and organizational outcomes, it is imperative to institutionalize gender mainstreaming within statutes and governance routines via gender equality commissions, affirmative action mechanisms, and protocols prohibiting harassment (Genta, 2021).

Likewise, awareness raising and training for observers (decision makers in cooperatives) regarding gender diversity is critical, considering that these actors determine internal policies and practices. This implication is consistent with Koenig et al. (2011) and Ridgeway (2001), who highlight how stereotypes and cognitive biases embedded in organizational structures limit female participation in managerial roles. Evidence suggests that gender diversity, together with other board attributes, is part of the governance configurations associated with higher levels of web transparency within nonprofits (Benito-Esteban et al., 2024), while broader governance mechanisms such as codes of ethics, oversight structures, and internal accountability practices play a key role in reinforcing organizational legitimacy (Ortega-Rodríguez et al., 2023).

These actions can strengthen the coherence between the values declared by cooperatives and their practices. Promoting gender diversity can increase organizational legitimacy, strengthen member confidence, and improve the public perception of cooperatives. At the organizational level, it is essential to promote an inclusive culture and internal policies that facilitate work-family reconciliation. The effectiveness of these measures has been widely validated by studies in corporate contexts (Mensi-Klarbach & Seierstad, 2020).

Finally, in the environmental dimension, this research showed the relevance of public policies and legislative quotas as effective strategies to improve female representation in managerial spaces, corroborated by studies such as Labelle et al. (2015) and Moxom et al. (n.d.). Their effectiveness increases when combined with sectoral networks and awareness initiatives (García-Martí et al., 2024; Inglehart & Norris, 2003; Ugur-Cinar et al., 2024). Taken together, organizational reforms, observer-level change, and enabling regulation are mutually reinforcing and more promising than isolated measures.

Conclusion

This study provides a comprehensive perspective on the factors influencing gender diversity on cooperative boards, identifying enablers and persistent obstacles. At the individual level, the relevance of women's prior performance, leadership skills, and interpersonal style is highlighted, while at the organizational level, cooperative governance structures, inclusive hiring practices, flexible work arrangements, and mentoring programs emerge as key factors. However, environmental influences, such as gender quotas, entrenched stereotypes, and the masculinization of the sector, continue to significantly limit equity, evidencing the persistence of the "glass ceiling." The factors identified interact across multiple levels rather than operating in isolation, influencing the trajectories of women's access to and permanence in decision-making spaces.

Cooperatives, by virtue of their democratic and participatory nature, are often described as organizational forms uniquely positioned to advance more inclusive and equitable governance (ICA, 2015; ILO, 2015). At the same time, research highlights that this potential remains underexplored in nonprofit scholarship and requires more critical examination of how democratic principles translate into practice (Camargo Benavides & Ehrenhard, 2021). The findings of this article suggest that strategies such as inclusive recruitment, flexible practices, and mentoring programs can strengthen women's participation and retention on board. These strategies can be coherently integrated with cooperative values and principles, advancing both effectiveness and equity goals. In addition, the inclusion of women in governance not only responds to ethical and legal principles, but also represents an essential tool to enhance transparency, sustainability, and organizational resilience, in line with the Sustainable Development Goals, particularly SDG 5 on gender equality, SDG 10 on reduced inequalities, and SDG 16 on strong institutions.

In this sense, gender diversity can be interpreted as a structural component of organizational legitimacy. Yet the evidence also highlights tensions between cooperative principles and actual practices, revealing that a democratic ethos does not automatically translate into gender parity. Without sustained structural and cultural change, cooperatives risk reproducing the same inequalities observed in traditional firms.

This study brings originality by integrating recent empirical data with Stone and Colella's (1996) theoretical model, providing an enriched conceptual framework that encompasses the multiple dynamics affecting gender diversity in cooperative governance. It also contributes to filling a gap in nonprofit research, where cooperatives remain underexplored despite their democratic ethos (Camargo Benavides & Ehrenhard, 2021).

Ultimately, gender diversity on cooperative boards cannot be reduced to a numerical target or a matter of legal compliance. It must be examined as a structural issue of fairness and legitimacy, requiring sustained organizational and cultural change rather than reliance on individual remediation (Acker, 1990; Ely & Meyerson, 2000). Positioning gender equity within justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion debates underscores both the promise of cooperatives and their responsibility to uphold the values they espouse (Stivers et al., 2023). Aligning governance practices with SDGs 5, 10, and 16 moves inclusion from principles to a concrete operational reality. In this sense, cooperatives can only fulfill their democratic mission by ensuring that women's participation in governance is not symbolic, but substantive, sustained, and transformative.

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Research involving human participants and/or animals. This research did not involve any studies with human participants or animals performed by any of the authors.

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