



Introduction: Gender Issues in Housing Co-operatives

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Ladies and gentlemen,

I have the honour to introduce the second part of this joint seminar on Gender Issues in Housing Co-operatives, specifically on women and housing. We have already discussed other special needs of various disadvantaged groups, now we will speak about, as we say in Italian “la regina della casa” meaning “the Queen of the Castle”.

We can approach housing from two aspects: most importantly and closer to our co-operative principles, as a need almost like a basic human right, in fact the right to housing is a fundamental human right.

In each country we have a word meaning the lack of a house. The most famous is the American term “homeless”. It identifies a marginalised group and it really represents a group of people without roots. Often a house represents our roots, our psychological escape.

The second aspect is its role as a driver in our economy. The real estate market has been up to now the main driver and dominates the demand in this stage of our economic history. We can see, in many countries, market prices have skyrocketed and many economists are worried that this bubble will burst. The consequences would be worrying for the economic recovery that we have been hoping for.

What role can women play in these two aspects of housing? Why should we focus on gender in the housing co-operative?

In the past, family meant a house, now this is no longer true and there is a structural change due to the new independence of women. The family is more spread out and we have new needs for the elderly, young people, single women or men, and women who have become household heads.

Often the lack of a house is an obstacle to create a new family and in many European countries, the problem of cohabitation is still present.

Therefore women are a target for the housing co-operative movement because often the women decide on how the house is to be designed.

So a gender approach is to meet our members needs even if they are not official members. What is a gender perspective? It means improving the position of women at the decision-making levels, because their input can influence the type of housing. For example, features of safety, security, convenience, cleaning, access to services and there is also an increasing awareness in the use of ecologically friendly new technology. The quality of housing, thus, the economic aspect is much more than in the past, influenced by the quality and the quantity of services. So improving women’s

participation at the top levels becomes a way to approach the new problems and a great opportunity to promote housing co-operatives.

A significant role for housing co-operatives is to guarantee housing to all. In developed countries new demands from disadvantaged groups have been increasing, as well as those already considered in the first session, the elderly, the disabled, we have to turn our attention, more and more, to the migrant groups. They are now, in many European countries, an important part of our workforce.

The co-operative movement must be able to sustain their becoming citizens in our countries. A basic condition is to provide them with housing that can allowed them, if they wish, to try to put down new roots.

In developing countries housing is a way to improve the basic standard of living. The symbol of marginalisation and poverty in the world is the “favelas” in South America and the “slums” of the main towns in Africa and Asia. Co-operatives must be involved in removing this shame of humanity, of course they need the support of governmental laws and incentives to do this.

Especially in this situation the co-operative movement should listen to women and be able to involve them in planning.

This joint seminar is the culmination of a lot of work and energy carried out by both women and the housing co-operatives. This has been a valuable experience that will pave the way for future projects.