

The A B C
OF THE
WOMEN'S CO-OPERATIVE GUILD.

FAWCETT COLLECTION

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THE A B C OF THE WOMEN'S CO-OPERATIVE GUILD.

WHAT is the Women's Co-operative Guild? and what is it for? are questions often heard. And it is even occasionally asked, "Why should women want to take part in public life outside their home life? And will not the home duties of working women be sure to suffer if they are encouraged to take an interest in such outside matters as the Co-operative Stores?"

This paper is intended to answer these inquiries as simply and plainly as possible, in the hope that the path to the Guild may be made plainer and easier.

Before we can understand the Guild, **Co-operation.** we must take a look at the word "Co-operation," and see what that means. Co-operation means working together, and by the Co-operative movement—with its great system of Distributive Stores, its Co-operative Wholesale Society, its Productive Societies, and its Co-operative Union—we mean an immense association of working people, who join together to provide themselves with food, clothing,

furniture, &c.—in fact, with all the necessaries of life. In our factories an army of employees, working short hours under good conditions, make many of the goods which are afterwards sold in our Stores. The surplus, after paying all expenses of rent, management, wages, &c., is divided among the members—that is, the purchasers; and *anyone* prepared to purchase may become a member and share in the much-prized “divi.” During the year 1928 this surplus, or dividend, amounted to the sum of over £24 million. This sum was divided among the nearly six million people who are Co-operators in England, Scotland, and Ireland.

Our endeavour is to manufacture and sell honest and wholesome goods, and to carry out in workshop and Store alike the golden rule, “Wherefore in all things, whatsoever ye would that men should do unto you, do ye even so unto them.”

The Co-operative movement sprang from the thought of working men and women, and during its whole existence has been carried out by them. It has proved of enormous value in developing natural abilities and character, and not only produces goods and dividends, but it makes men and women citizens of whom we may justly be proud.

It has been frequently found that **The Woman's Part in this Movement.** while a man may be an ardent Co-operator or trade unionist, his wife, too, often knows very little of such matters.

In the older-fashioned days it was the custom to sever the man's work from the woman's by

the hard and fast rule that while the man's work and interests lay in outside matters, the woman's were entirely with those inside the house—the children, the house, the cleaning, the washing, the sewing, &c. In fact, women were hardly supposed to be able to understand anything outside their homes.

But we have come to see that these outside matters are as important to women as to men. The home depends on good social conditions, and a large part of many women's lives is spent in factories and workshops.

If education and the fullest development of his powers in this outside work is good for the man, it is equally good for the woman. “The man's cause is the woman's, and together they stand or fall,” and the man and the woman should stand side by side in their common work for social progress.

Facts prove that women have talents and gifts over and above what are needed to “follow the house,” and what we ask is to be given a chance of using them.

Now, while a woman's work and influence begin at home, they do not, of necessity, end there, and the woman who does the work of her own home with wisdom, tact, and skill, could probably do a great many other things in what is called outside work with equal wisdom, tact, and skill. A writer has said, “Every woman is in her sphere when she is doing what she can do well, and what she delights in doing.”

While the highest duties of a mother may be in training up her own children in the best way, and making her own home attractive and happy, it does not follow that the more ignorant she is of outside concerns the better she will be able to do it. On the contrary, again and again it has been proved that, as one of our early workers, Mrs. Brown (Burnley) told us, "the more women rise to the fullest development of their powers, the better they will fill their positions in the destinies of the world," and "no woman is less a woman because she cares for all the concerns of the world into which her child is born." Yet it is not always easy for a woman, especially when she is a woman doing the work of her own house, to find time and means for learning the facts concerning the Co-operative movement or the trade union movement, or of the laws of the land relating to women and children, and their work and interests.

It is not always easy to manage the regular weekly night out, and yet, when *it is* managed, the different surroundings, the new thoughts, and the pleasant comradeship are valuable additions to the home life. Many a woman now delights in knowing about the details of Store management, or in mastering the wheels within wheels of the C.W.S. (Co-operative Wholesale Society) or the Co-operative Union, and in working on different committees; and these make her understand the need for loyalty and education in a way she never did before. And she would probably never have had a chance of obtaining this knowledge but for our Guild.

The Guild organises women as Co-operators for the study and practice of Co-operation and other industrial and social reforms. The objects of the Guild are summed up in the words on the card of membership, a beautiful picture which every Guild member should possess. The Guild is here described as "a self-governing organisation of women, who work through Co-operation for the welfare of the people, seeking freedom for their own progress, and the equal fellowship of men and women in the Home, the Store, the Workshop, and the State."

Women, as the chief buyers, have as much to do with the success of the Stores as men. It is not much use persuading the husband to be a Co-operator if the wife continues to buy at the big cheap shop or the little grocer round the corner, because she thinks she can get more for her money, or likes the goods better. Unless women went to the Stores to buy, the Stores would be obliged to shut up; so it is necessary to provide women as well as men with opportunities for learning about the various parts of the Co-operative movement, and all the advantages of being a Co-operator.

Women form the great bulk of the purchasers, and thus hold immense power for good or evil in their hands—for it is the *demand* of the purchasers that decides what the *supply* shall be.

How can pure goods, made under fair conditions, be insisted on if purchasers have never heard of sweated work on the one hand, or of Co-operative productions, trade union labour, and our own Wholesale on the other?

Frequently the result of this ignorance is that Stores are filled with soap and cocoa and jams, &c., coming from private firms, instead of with goods of our own make.

Our Co-operative factories and workshops now employ about 240,000 men and women, and might employ as many more if members were thoroughly loyal. Trips to see over our factories form excellent object-lessons, and where these cannot be arranged, lantern lectures are most useful in making Co-operators understand how our money is expended in running our own works, in order to supply our own Stores.

Women can be shareholders, and so have the right to attend quarterly meetings and to vote. It is worthy of remark that some of the largest and most successful Societies are those where women members are most numerous. As women have the Co-operative franchise, it is of the greatest importance that they should use their vote wisely and well.

Women have proved their capacity on educational and management committees, as well as on the Central Co-operative Board, the Educational Committee of the Co-operative Union, the Educational Committees' Associations, and other bodies.*

* In 1930 there were 344 Guild members on management committees, 867 on educational committees, four on the Central Board, two on the Co-operative Union Educational Committee, and women sat on the executives of all the Educational Committees' Associations.

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Again, the women can do much to improve the condition and shorten the hours of our employees, *i.e.*, our comrades serving behind the counters.

Often we are surprised to read in newspapers of the long hours worked in private shops and in dressmakers' and milliners' rooms, and of the low wages paid to women. Yet perhaps we have never even thought of inquiring how many hours per week *our own* Store is open, or how many hours are worked or what wages are paid in the very workrooms that we are partly responsible for. We should never lose sight of the fact that our Store belongs to *us*, and part of the responsibility for managing it well rests with us; and it is our duty to seek out and elect the best possible men and women available for management and educational committees.

If we have found the Co-operative way of trading good for ourselves, we **Women as Propagandists.** must try to spread the news of it.

If cash trading, the laying up of "divi.," and the understanding of our own movement have been good for us, they will, of course, be good for our neighbours, and we must try to draw all outsiders into the circle of benefit. There are many who have never heard at all of Co-operation and its many benefits, and there are many who have only heard in a vague way, and have no idea how or when to join the Society, or the precise amount they will have to pay to enter. And, again, there are actual members of our Stores who know

nothing of the movement, and who want transforming into thoughtful, loyal Co-operators.

So there is plenty of work for women in learning themselves, and then in helping others.

This work is carried on in the Guild by means of weekly meetings, which are managed and arranged by the Branches themselves, and not by any outsider or person in authority. The Branch members themselves choose their own leaders, who form the committee.

The programme of work to be done at the weekly meetings should include education and recreation, and should be printed attractively in the local *Wheat-sheaf* or *Record*, with the titles of all lectures and papers.

The chief object of the Guild is the study and practice of Co-operation and other methods of social reform, and this should be carried out at the Branch Meetings. Lantern lectures on the Co-operative Wholesale Society, Co-operative Productions, the *Co-operative News*, &c., will help the members to realise the work that is being done by the Co-operative movement, and the need for increasing Co-operative capital. Papers and addresses by local Co-operators should also be included. Explanations of the Society's balance sheet, by members of the Management or Educational Committees, will enable Guild members (who should always, if possible, be members of their Store) to understand and take part in the business at the quarterly meetings.

Every Guild member should take in the *Co-operative News*, and should make a point of always reading the "Women's Pages," which contain all kinds of Guild news.

Social reform includes all proposals for improving the conditions under which the workers live. These proposals touch closely the lives of Co-operators, and, through the Guild, women can obtain knowledge about them and express their views.

Trade unionism is one of the most important methods by which the workers can obtain better conditions. Women Co-operators should thoroughly understand trade union principles, so that they may help forward trade unionism among Co-operative employees, and may train and encourage their children, especially their daughters, to become trade unionists.

Nearly all women Co-operators are now voters, and the Guild endeavours to help them to understand the importance of the vote and the necessity of using it for the Co-operative Party. Every Branch should study the political questions of the day from the point of view of Co-operation. The Co-operative programme includes first and foremost all the measures necessary for the extension of Co-operation. It supports also a Democratic League of Nations, Taxation of Land Values and Wealth instead of taxation of food and necessaries, the National Care of Maternity, Better Housing, and Improved Education. Factory Acts to shorten hours and improve the conditions under which women work, Wages Boards to secure a legal

minimum wage in the most sweated trades, are other reforms which women Co-operators ought to support.

Women Co-operators should take their part also in supporting good local government. Women suffer most from bad housing. The home is the woman's workshop, and it is where her working day is spent. Women know how necessary it is to have public baths and wash-houses, and what a difference it makes to health when the Public Health laws are enforced and insanitary conditions done away with. There is great need for progressive women to be elected on to Town and County Councils, a position open to women who have resided for 12 months in the Borough or County, and for women health inspectors to be appointed.

Special Co-operative and social reform subjects are each year brought to the notice of Guild members, both in the suggestions for the winter's work (sent out each August to Branches), and also at the Annual Congress and Sectional Conferences. Popular papers on many questions can be obtained on loan from the General Secretary, 14, JOHN STREET, BEDFORD ROW, LONDON, W.C.1, by Branches or by individual members. Central Committee, Sectional Council, and District Committee members undertake to speak on the Guild special subjects, and their names and subjects are sent out to the Branches in September each year. When there are lectures and papers, an opportunity should always be given at the end for questions and discussion.

Branches will find that they receive **Conferences.** many invitations to Conferences, and they are strongly recommended to attend as many as possible. At Conferences numerous suggestions for Branch work are given; members get to know what the Guild as a whole is doing; and Branches are kept in touch with each other and with the elected officials of the Guild.

Most important of all is it that Branches should send representatives to the Guild Annual Congress, held each year in June or July, when delegates from all the Branches meet together in Council.

Work of the kind outlined here **Branch Funds.** cannot be carried on without funds.

The Branch funds are raised: (1) by members' subscriptions, usually fixed at 2s. to 4s. a year, payable monthly or quarterly; (2) by a grant from the Society or Educational Committee; (3) by profits on socials. The funds are used for printing, postage, delegates' expenses, lectures, and for carrying on the work of the Branch generally, including the payment of the annual subscriptions to the Central and to the District Funds.

There are at the present time (March, **central** 1931) about 1,431 Branches, with about **Organisation.** 67,000 members, and, naturally, so large a Guild needs some organisation to keep all the members in touch, and the work general and united.

This organisation is as simple as possible, and consists of:—

- (1) A Central Committee of eight members, elected by all the Branches.
- (2) Sectional Councils and Sectional Secretaries, elected in each section.
- (3) District Committees, elected in each district.

In order to become a member of the **Affiliation to Guild**, every Branch must pay the annual **the Guild.** subscription of 9d. per member to the Central Fund. The payment of this subscription gives Branches the right:—

- (1) To send voting delegates to the Guild Annual Congress.
- (2) To vote in the election of Central Committee and Sectional Council.
- (3) To send delegates to the Half-yearly Sectional Conferences.
- (4) To have the use of the Guild Popular Papers, &c.
- (5) To take part in the combined work of the Guild.

This fund was formed to send sick **The Mrs. Jones** Guild members away for change of air. **Guild Conva-** It is supported by donations and **lescent Fund.** annual subscriptions from Branches, in addition to the interest on some capital invested. For further information apply to the Secretary, to whom all subscriptions should be sent, and

whose address is given in the list of Officials and Branch Secretaries' addresses, published annually in August.

Every member of a Branch will naturally work in every way for the good of her Society. By dealing loyally, making new members, attending quarterly meetings, and by supporting all educational and progressive measures, Guild members will be contributing their part to the advance of the movement.



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