



## HOUSING COOPERATIVES NEEDS ASSESSMENT REPORT: *PRÉSENCE DES FEMMES, POUVOIR DES FEMMES*

[Women's presence, women's power]

The *Fédération des coopératives d'habitation intermunicipale du Montréal métropolitain (FECHIMM)*,  
Table régionale des centres de femmes de Montréal métropolitain et Laval (TRCFMML),  
Comité logement de Lachine-LaSalle (CLLL) et le Groupe de ressources techniques (GRT) Réseau 2000+ portent le projet  
*Les coopératives d'habitation: présence des femmes, pouvoir des femmes* [Women's Presence, Women's Power]

Funded by Status of Women Canada, the goal of this three year project is to make a significant impact on women's participation and empowerment<sup>1</sup> in housing cooperatives.

### Background of the project

- Women are still under-represented in decision-making positions, or relegated to "traditional" roles, both on the boards and in the committees.
- The specific situation of women in cooperatives has never been the subject of targeted action on the part of actors in the participatory housing sector.
- Housing cooperatives are structures where people learn about democratic process and the common good and as such are conducive to the development of egalitarian and inclusive practices.

### Our actions:

- **IDENTIFY** the challenges women face and formulate recommendations
- **MOBILIZE** co-op residents and partners around these findings
- **EQUIP**
  - project leaders and their extended network (team, board, coalitions, etc.) to take women's realities into account
  - women by enabling them to define goals, priorities and means with a view to taking their rightful place in cooperatives
- **SHARE** the knowledge and practices we develop

To support the recommendations that emerge from this project and guide the work plan, the project leaders conducted a needs assessment.

### What are women's experiences of participation in cooperative housing?

This summary presents the highlights of the needs assessment report conducted for the project. Produced by the project leaders with the assistance of **Relais-femmes**, the report outlines women's experiences in housing cooperatives. The full report is available at [fechimm.coop/](http://fechimm.coop/)



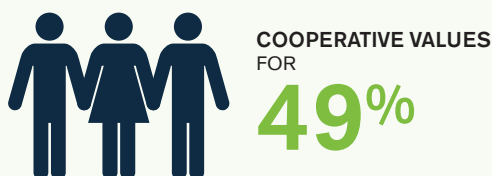
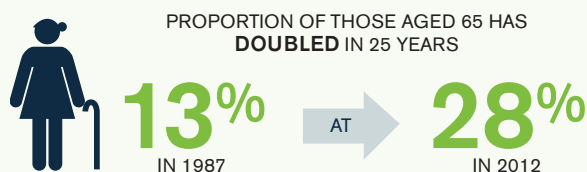
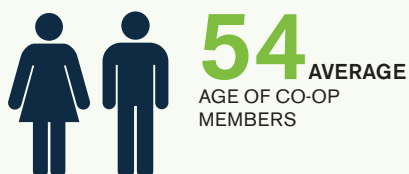
LES COOPÉRATIVES D'HABITATION :  
**présence** des femmes,  
**pouvoir** des femmes

# SOME STATISTICS

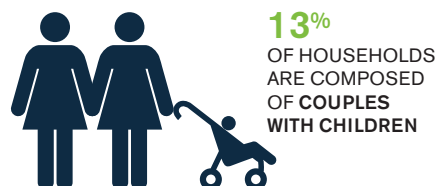
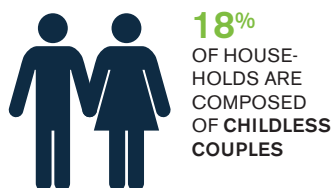
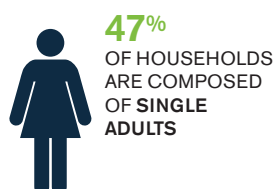
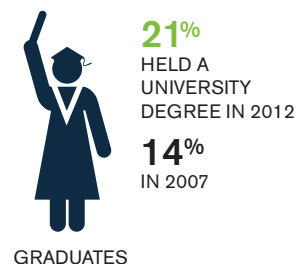


Source: FECHIMM (2018)

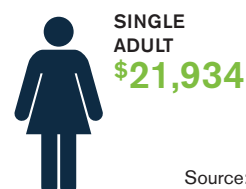
## Who are the residents of cooperatives?



MAIN REASONS FOR  
CHOOSING CO-OP HOUSING



## AVERAGE ANNUAL INCOME OF CO-OP MEMBERS



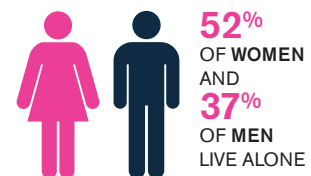
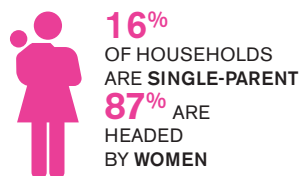
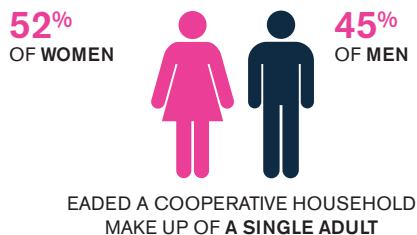
Source: Confédération québécoise  
des coopératives d'habitation (2013)

# SOME STATISTICS



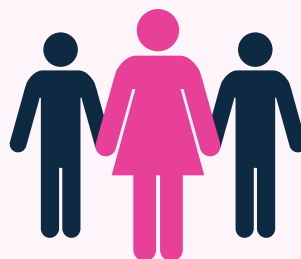
Source: Confédération québécoise  
des coopératives d'habitation (2013)

## What about women?



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The proportion of women **CHAIRS** and  
**VICE-CHAIRS** is **48.9%** et **49.6%**  
respectively, (under-represented by 17%  
in terms of their numbers in housing co-ops)



↑

The proportion of women who  
serve as **SECRETARY** is **73.4%**  
(under-represented by 7.4%).

↓

The proportion of women  
**TREASURERS** is **58.7%**,  
(under-represented by 7.3%).



↓

The proportion of women serving as  
a **NON-EXECUTIVE BOARD MEMBER**,  
as **56.8%**, (under-represented by 9.2%).

Source: FECHIMM (2017)

# PARTICIPATION ISSUES

## 95 individuals were consulted:

- 60 co-op residents (48 women and 12 men) from 46 cooperatives in Montréal and Laval
- 6 participants in a start-up group (4 women and 2 men)
- 15 employees of the FECHIMM and 14 practitioners from the cooperative sector (housing committees, technical resource groups and women's centres)

### Difficult democratic process

According to the people we met with, this is due to a mistaken idea of what a housing cooperative is, as well as the loss of cooperative values and excessive red tape. It is manifested by a disrespectful atmosphere in committees, the board and general meetings, and by the monopolization of power by a small group. **Women, particularly, have the experience of not being listened to and suffer the consequences of these governance issues.**

**“In our co-op, there is a definite lack of involvement which is maybe due to a lack of understanding of what it means to live in a co-op.”**

A male resident

**“Often women are scapegoated when a dysfunctional dynamic has existed for a long time.”**

A female practitioner

### Lack of knowledge transfer

Everyone who was interviewed expressed concern about the transfer of knowledge in boards and committees. It is generally lacking, which hinders the integration and participation of new members. **This obstacle particularly affects women who do not always feel they have the competence to carry out the role they have been given.**

**“When we take a new position we're on our own and it's still happening today.”**

A female resident

### Members' diverse social situations are insufficiently taken into account

A significant number of respondents affirmed that many cooperatives fail to consider their members' social situations, particularly with respect to participation in co-op life. Examples: the situations of older people, people with poor literacy skills, people with functional impairments, immigrants, and individuals with different incomes or levels of schooling. Yet, these individuals face additional obstacles to their participation (prejudice, discrimination, ageism, etc.).

**“In meetings, it's mostly franco-phones who speak. People from cultural communities sit in the back and don't talk as much.”**

A female resident

## Gender stereotypes and the consequences

Gender stereotyping is prevalent and is manifested in various ways.

- **The “imposter syndrome”:** A sense of incompetency is evident in the comments of numerous women we met with. These women believe that what they think isn't worth saying and they tend to lack self-confidence.
- **Stereotyped task distribution** Many women tend to assume positions or responsibilities in which their knowledge or skills are confirmed.
- **A questioning of women's power and responsibilities and the resulting sexist abuses.** A number of residents referred to sexist prejudice in cooperatives. The example frequently given is that women in the maintenance committees are subjected to the paternalistic attitudes of some men and are not listened to.

“In mixed settings, women are sometimes unwilling to speak, for example, during board meetings.”

A female practitioner

“I was the chair and for some of the male residents a woman is not supposed to hold a position of power. I experienced sexism and intimidation and other women involved in the committees have gone through similar situations.”

A female resident

## Difficulty of balancing work, family and community involvement

An obstacle mentioned by the vast majority of women respondents was balancing work, family life and involvement in the co-op. This is particularly true for young families and single-parent families. Their myriad tasks means lack of time to participate in committees, the board or training sessions.

“The time I was least involved was when I was a single mother.”

A female resident

## Engagement and power: women's and men's experience differs

Women's and men's understanding of power differs. Respondents referred to a masculine culture of power (actual or perceived) shaped by tradition. Examples of this are the time men take up in meetings, the importance accorded to men's ideas, etc. Women often feel they are alone with a lot of responsibility on their shoulders, and many express the need for a network.

## Violence, intimidation and harassment

Participants in the study spoke about incidents of violence, mainly harassment and intimidation, but also, sexual violence.

# SUGGESTIONS FOR IMPROVING WOMEN'S LIVES AND PARTICIPATION IN COOPERATIVES

## For cooperatives

- **Start a child care service**, reimburse babysitting costs or exempt those who are looking after children from certain chores, or work bees.
- **Adopt a facilitation approach that enables each participant to speak**, e.g., alternate male and female speakers during meetings.
- **Set up an equality and diversity committee in cooperatives responsible for countering prejudice** developing non-communication practices, etc.
- **Support women's networking** in cooperatives and among cooperatives.
- **Encourage rotation of members on committees and the board** so that all members benefit from maximum opportunities for learning and to avoid the concentration of power or development of conflict.

## For the FECHIMM

- Develop **GBA+ training for workers** to address gender equality, sexism, prejudice, discrimination and the specific realities of women and men.
- Formulate policy **for managing situations of domestic violence and sexual assault**.

## For the women's committee of FECHIMM

- **Provide mentoring** to women who want to become involved.
- **Organize a day of appreciation** with other cooperatives on the movement's values, with the focus on women's participation.

## For technical resource groups (GRT)

- **Create a lexicon to facilitate the integration and active involvement** of new members in the start-up groups.
- **Take into account the difficulty of balancing work, family and community involvement** when organizing meetings.



# SOME KEY CONCEPTS

## GBA+

*Présence des femmes, pouvoir des femmes*  
is guided by the gender-based analysis + approach (GBA+), a tool that identifies the differing realities of women and men and proposes adapted measures or actions. The “+” means that the analysis encompasses more than the factors of sex (biological differences) and gender (social construction of sex), by also considering other forms of domination or discrimination that may be simultaneously in play.

Source: Condition féminine Canada

## Empowerment

Empowerment is a process or mechanism by which individuals, groups and communities acquire greater control over the events that concern them.

Source: Relais-femmes

## Governance

Governance refers to the rules and collective processes, formal and informal, by which individuals participate in the decisions about public actions and their implementation. These rules and processes, like the resulting decisions, are the result of constant negotiations among the multiple actors involved.

Source: Relais-femmes

## Gender stereotypes

Gender stereotyping is defined as the attribution of a person's roles, behaviours and characteristics based on their sex without regard for their individuality. They shape the way we perceive ourselves as women and men. Gender stereotypes are intimately connected with gender inequality. It is important to encourage reflection, awareness, and critical thinking on gender stereotypes and propose other models.

Source: Conseil du statut de la femme

## Women's relationship to power

Women have various experiences of the exercise of power. They mention two main problems: the near necessity of conforming with the patriarchal model that still prevails in the structures of power, and the lack of models for women in the exercise of power. Added to this is the gender-based socialization that leaves girls inadequately equipped to thrive in the public sphere and, at the same time, causes us to judge women who assume powerful positions more harshly.

Source: Relais-femmes

## Violence

Violence takes various forms—verbal, physical, psychological, sexual, and financial—that may be exercised in combination. Individuals of all ages (children, teens, adults and seniors) may be the target of violence. It occurs regardless of socioeconomic class, national or cultural background, in diverse situations. The term “violence against women” is used to emphasize that women are generally more likely than men to endure serious harm from violence: physical injury, trauma, emotional, social and financial repercussions.

Source: Fédération des maisons d'hébergement pour femmes



# WHO ARE THE PROJECT LEADERS?

- The FECHIMM is the second largest federation in Canada and the largest federation Québec. Its membership consists of some 460 cooperatives 12,000 households. Through its services and training workshops, the FECHIMM helps to consolidate housing cooperatives by fostering the acquisition of skills that are essential to enterprises' self-management.
- Table régionale des centres de femmes de Montréal métropolitain et Laval (TRCFMML) is a grouping of 14 women's centres. These feminist resources seek to diminish women's isolation and improve their living conditions through services, collective actions and popular education activities. The TRCFMML supports its members by providing training, producing collective tools and sharing resources and knowledge. It serves as a network for collective action to achieve equality and social justice for women, by women, and with women.
- The *Comité logement de Lachine-LaSalle* CLLL is a community rights advocacy group. Its mission is to promote and protect access to quality affordable housing, mainly for households in Lachine and LaSalle. The CLLL its mission through various means, including collective rights advocacy, independent popular education, public education and awareness, promotion and development.
- The mission of the *Groupe de ressources techniques (GRT) Réseau 2000+* is to bring together, facilitate, support and advise individuals and groups in carrying out community housing, cooperative, and non-profit projects. The organization serves the regions of Laval and the Laurentians.

