

NOTES

Workshop: African American Women in Worker Cooperatives

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Jessica Gordon Nembhard is a professor in political economy and political science. She is currently writing a book on African American Cooperatives, and has found quite a bit of information about African American women in cooperatives.

Cooperatives can be:

- good businesses
- sustainable in the community
- empowering for minority groups
- empowering for women

African American women's experience in co-ops is different than other groups'.

-typically involved in smaller cooperatives, whereas white women have typically been involved in larger cooperatives.

-oftentimes involved in starting a cooperative alongside an African American man.

There is a rich, but hidden history of African American women in cooperatives; most of the examples are of men and women working together.

The ability to have control over their income is important, especially since many African American women were (and are) the main breadwinner in their household.

Examples of African American women in cooperatives:

1. International ladies auxiliary of the brotherhood of sleeping car (Pullman car) porters. (international because it included Canada)

The Int'l brotherhood of sleeping car porters was a union composed of mostly black men, although a few women were involved. The women in the auxiliary were mostly the wives of union members, but sometimes were union members themselves. One of their key responsibilities as an organization was to collect dues for the brotherhood.

However, they were also very aware of the importance of consuming responsibly (at union shops and cooperatives). This led to their becoming gradually more interested in the democratic model, and to the formation of several consumer cooperatives. WEB DuBois said that consumer cooperatives could encourage demand and support for producer cooperatives. The women of the auxiliary were often invited to speak before people involved in white-run consumer cooperatives—they were respected in the co-op community for their expertise.

They started a credit union in Canada, as well as a co-op eye clinic. They started credit unions and grocery stores in the US.

These women were, first and foremost, "ladies." They came from union families with decent middle class wages. At one point, they were unhappy about sharing offices with the brotherhood. They recognized their need for autonomy, even though they saw themselves as being in solidarity with the Brotherhood.

Ella Jo Baker: Although she is most well known for her work in the 1960's with SNIC, she was also the executive director of the young negro's co-op league for 10 years in the 1930's. The young negro's co-op league was a national support groups for each region that was developing co-ops. There was a "penny a day" program, where the idea was that every sympathetic worker should contribute 1 cent a day towards a co-op development fund. This didn't really pan out. After the network disbanded, Baker was involved in co-ops in the Northeastern US until the mid 1940's. Baker contested the "slave market" practice, where African American women had to stand on street corners everyday in order to get day labor domestic work.

Fannie Lou Hamer: Famous for her quote: "I'm tired of being tired." She is most well known for her voting rights work in the 1960's, but worked on co-ops later on in her life. She was worried that people would be given their civil rights, but not economic rights, so she started the Freedom Farm Co-op. She was involved in "pig banking," a practice that involved raising money to buy a sow, impregnate her, and give her to a family. Once the sow had piglets, the family was supposed to keep one and pass on the rest to other families. Since you need land in order to raise pigs, Hamer decided that "pig banking" was not enough. This is why she started the Freedom Farm Co-op.

Examples of Co-ops:

Freedom quilting bee co-op: It was started in the 1860's by African American wives of sharecroppers. They made quilts, and a local priest took them up north to sell. Eventually they had enough money from selling the quilts that they bought 23 acres of land, upon which they build a sewing factory, a day care center, and a tutoring center. They also used the land for farming, helping many farmers move out of the debt-cycle of share cropping. This was especially helpful and important for sharecroppers who had been thrown off of their land for things like voting. The co-op still exists.

Cooperative home care associates: Founded by Rick Surpin. It is a worker coop that had about 30 worker-owners in the beginning. It was a for-profit subsidiary of a non-profit. There is an emphasis on quality training and good jobs for low-income people. They are able to provide worker-owners with living wages, benefits, and dividends. It is now the largest worker co-op in the US, with about 12,000 worker owners (although not all of them are in the same location). The workers are a mix of Latinas and African American women. The cooperative provides workers with job ladders that allow them to advance into mentoring, management, quality control, etc. They even are working to give more RN-type training to workers.