

# Faces and Phases of Women's Empowerment: The Case of Women's Cooperatives in Turkey

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This article provides an in-depth look at women's empowerment through women's cooperatives. Drawing on evidence from a diverse set of women's cooperatives in Turkey, the article investigates the prospects and constraints of women's empowerment in contexts lacking an enabling macro-institutional framework and societal structure. Listening to the real-life stories of women from different socio-economic and political backgrounds, we explore how and to what extent members experience empowerment in their lives after joining the cooperatives. We find that, even under political and societal constraints, women experience economic, psychological, social, and organizational empowerment, though the extent of such empowerment varies across cases.

## Introduction

The young Turkish Republic of the early 20th century prided itself on putting women's issues under the spotlight as a cornerstone of modernization. It had abolished polygamy and granted women suffrage rights and public visibility. Despite these revolutionary changes, patriarchy has been left intact in many areas. Turkish women are expected to serve the nation by being good mothers and rational homemakers in the private sphere (Alemdaroglu 2015, 55; Dedeoglu 2013, 10). According to the latest World Economic Forum's gender gap index, Turkey ranks 130th (out of 149), particularly lagging in the areas of women's economic participation and political empowerment (World Economic Forum 2018).

Turkish women, already facing difficult conditions, found themselves under a more restrictive social setting during the Justice and Development Party (AKP) era. The AKP came to power in 2002 and started pushing a more

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conservative agenda around 2007 (Acar and Altunok 2013). The AKP's policies entail a mixture of neoliberal and social conservatism (Acar and Altunok 2013; Buğra and Keyder 2006, 213). In this context, women shoulder most of housework, child and elderly care, which leads to what scholars call "time poverty" (Öneş et al. 2013), engage in economic activities only sporadically and informally (Acar and Altunok 2013, 16–8), and most of the time lack social and job security.

While the coupling of patriarchy and neoliberalism is not unique to Turkey, it is possible to discern particular assemblages of the Turkish gender regime during the last two decades. This could be explained by what Kandiyoti calls the rise of "neo-conservative familism" (Kandiyoti 2016, 106). This period is characterized by the shrinking role of the state in social protection and increasing emphasis on pro-natalist and family centered politics (Buğra and Yakut-Çakar 2010; Coşar and Yeğenoğlu 2011; Yazıcı 2012).

Given the current status of women in Turkey, cooperatives give women the potential for collectively improving their conditions. The literature on women's cooperatives highlights many gains that these cooperatives have made (Datta and Gailey 2012; Deji 2005; Eccarius-Kelly 2006; Ferguson and Kepe 2011; Iakovidou 2002; Onyejekwe 2001; Peterson 2014; Vazquez et al. 2016). However, there are still research questions that are not fully explored. One such area concerns the linkage between women's cooperatives and women's empowerment. Jones et al. (2012, 16) point out that there has been little systematic research into the nature and scale of women's empowerment via women's collective enterprises, including women's cooperatives. This article aims to shed light on the relationship between women's cooperatives and women's empowerment based on the case of Turkey, showing how and to what extent women experience empowerment under patriarchal norms and neoliberal policies.

As this study will demonstrate, women are able to make economic gains, and reap psychological, social, and organizational benefits from their experiences in women's cooperatives despite the inhospitable institutional framework and harsh market conditions under which these cooperatives operate. With cooperatives, women are able to build stronger bonds with women close to them. They are also able to bridge out to women who are from different classes or ethnic backgrounds as well as to civil society organizations and other cooperatives. As this study will show, the extent to which women can reach beyond their immediate circles depends on their class and educational background. This study will also illustrate that women's cooperatives carry an important potential for women's empowerment but this potential is far from being reached because both the conservative and neoliberal mentalities that dominate the political and economic climate do not create favorable conditions for women's empowerment. While the conservative mentality views women as primarily familial and domestic beings and therefore does not invest in cooperatives for their emancipatory potential, neoliberalism

encourages piecemeal home-based production, exposes women to market insecurities, and replaces formal benefits with more irregular fragmented goods delivered to individuals by governmental and municipal authorities. As will be shown in this article, this situation leads women to hesitate to take on jobs in the cooperatives for the fear of losing the goods and benefits they receive.

## Understanding Women's Empowerment

This article defines women's empowerment as the process through which women acquire the ability to make strategic and effective life choices and come to use this ability effectively for positive change (Goldman and Little 2015, 763; Janssens 2009, 975; Kabeer 1999, 435; Moghadam 1996, 13). "Women's empowerment" should be first analyzed with "an attempt to understand how, why, [and under what circumstances] women are oppressed" (Datta and Gailey 2012, 570). Without understanding the conditions that impede women's empowerment, it is impossible to pinpoint ways to strengthen and empower women. In many cases, as is the case in our research, women aspire to empower themselves under patriarchal rules which are further exacerbated by the increasingly conservative political outlook toward women and the harsh competition they are subjected to under neoliberalism.

The literature on women's empowerment underscores the utility of making analytical distinctions about the interrelated subcomponents of women's empowerment. Kabeer (1999, 437) defines empowerment as the ability to exercise choice and distinguishes between resources, agency, and achievements (outcomes). According to Kabeer, these interrelated dimensions are necessary for women to become empowered in their lives. Gaining resources such as education and employment skills is the first step toward empowerment. Agency, i.e., "women's perceptions of control over their own decisions" (Datta and Gailey 2012, 571), should accompany resources. According to Kabeer (2005, 15), "resources and agency make up people's capabilities: that is, their potential for living the lives they want." These two should be followed by observable achievements or outcomes in women's lives. As Kabeer (2005, 15) argues, "the term 'achievements' refers to the extent to which this potential is realized or fails to be realized; that is, to the outcomes of people's efforts."

Measuring specific, strictly quantifiable outcomes for women's empowerment is unrealistic as power dynamics in each community evolve over time and what constitutes "empowerment" can change from one location to another (Datta and Gailey 2012, 571). Hence, it is vital to contextualize the concept of empowerment and analyze how each individual and social group approaches it (Oberhauser and Pratt 2004, 221). Our article explores the extent and nature of empowerment achieved by women through cooperatives. Based on rich qualitative data, we analyze women's empowerment strategies

and achievements via women's cooperatives in Turkey, a country that lacks an empowerment-enabling macro-institutional framework coupled with patriarchal practices and fierce neoliberal competition.

## Women's Cooperatives in the World and in Turkey

Women's cooperatives stand out from other cooperatives due to their economic and social targets for progress, as well as their relatively flat, nonhierarchical structures (Datta and Gailey 2012, 578). While some women's cooperatives have longer historical roots (e.g., the Lijjat case, India, which has a five-decade old history), others have gained momentum in recent decades thanks to rising awareness and initiatives by national governments and international bodies such as the EU (Alaadini and Razavi 2005; Datta and Gailey 2012; Ferguson and Kepe 2011; Iakovidou 2002; Koutsou et al. 2003; Onyijekwe 2001; Ortmann and King 2007; Vazquez et al., 2016). Most women's cooperatives develop as a result of bottom-up approaches, reflecting the needs of local populaces (see Bacon 2010 on Nicaragua; Datta and Gailey 2012 on India; Eccarius-Kelly 2006 on Guatemala; Ferguson and Kepe 2011 on Uganda; Iakovidou 2002 on Greece). Throughout the world, the scope of operations of women's cooperatives spans various sectors, including agricultural products (Bacon 2010; Deji 2005; Ferguson and Kepe 2011), handicrafts (Alaadini and Razavi 2005; Ecevit 2007), food (Datta and Gailey 2012), and child and elderly-care (Ecevit 2007). A similar distribution of operational fields can be observed in Turkey. According to a recent survey of women's cooperatives, out of 63 active cooperatives, 42 are identified as enterprise cooperatives (67 percent), 18 are agricultural cooperatives (29 percent), while the remaining cooperatives operate in small arts, consumers, and manufacturing (Duguid et al. 2015).

The first women's cooperatives in Turkey were established in 1999 (Duguid et al. 2015). While the Ministry of Customs and Trade (MoCT) announced some economic incentives applicable for women's cooperatives including exemption from notary fees (Okan and Okan 2013, 41), women's cooperatives are still struggling in many regards. Experts underline the inconsistencies in the provision of external support and legal challenges and the government's focus only on the economic functions of women's cooperatives (the MoCT officials call their incentive package "women's cooperatives entrepreneurship") as well as its total disregard of for social and psychological benefits of women's cooperatives for their members and society at large (Duguid et al. 2015, 46).

A recent World Bank report emphasizes the versatility of women's cooperatives in the sense that, unlike other cooperatives operating in Turkey, they are not simply concerned with the provision of jobs but also a social outlet for its members and the community at large. The "multipurpose nature" of the

cooperatives can also be observed through a closer look at the reasons for starting the cooperatives. While the majority of active cooperatives mention the “provision of jobs” as the main reason for their establishment (59 percent), others emphasize social and cultural services and public awareness as the main motivation. These reasons include empowerment of women socially (17 percent), finding solutions to women’s issues (16 percent), childcare services (6 percent), organization and empowerment of members (5 percent), provision of social services for the community (5 percent), provision of goods for the community (2 percent), and institutionalization of informal communication and organization (6 percent) (Duguid et al. 2015, 45). According to the report, the average number of women in Turkey who benefit from women’s cooperatives, be it financially or through the provision of other goods and services such as health care provision or legal advice, is estimated to be around 7,206 annually (Duguid et al. 2015, 81).

Albeit illuminating, the extant body of the literature (Duguid et al. 2015; Ecevit 2007; Okan and Okan 2013; Özdemir 2013) remains mostly descriptive and there is dearth of research linking the effects of these cooperatives on women’s emancipation and empowerment. Thus, our article investigates the impact of women’s cooperatives on women’s empowerment in cases such as Turkey with a dominant patriarchal culture and increasing emphasis on family-centered politics as well as neoliberal economic competition.

## Methodology

This study utilizes semi-structured in-depth interviews with members of women cooperatives throughout Turkey to understand self-perceptions of empowerment by cooperative members and to examine the conditions that support or hinder women’s empowerment. Semi-structured interviews enable us to introduce the major themes of our research to our respondents and give them the opportunity to fully articulate their responses in their own ways (Mosley 2013).

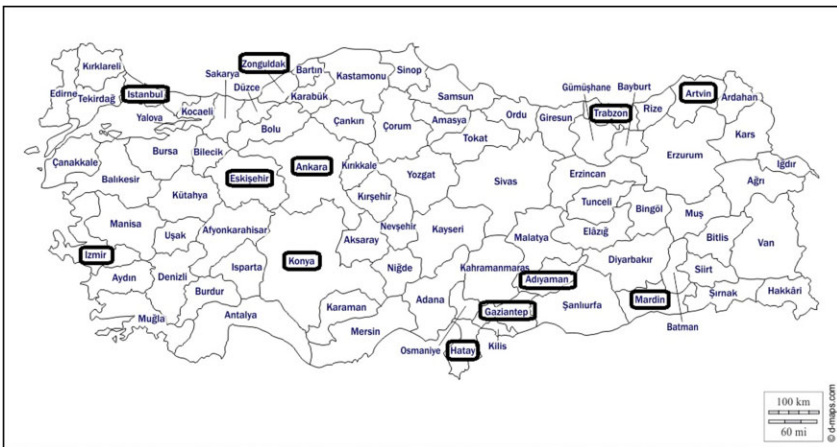
While some scholars utilize quantitative techniques such as large-N survey design to provide breadth to research findings (Goldman and Little 2015; Janssens 2009), our study aims to complement these approaches with a deeper understanding and interpretation of women’s empowerment experienced by the members of women’s cooperatives (Datta and Gailey 2012; Oberhauser and Pratt 2004).

Our extensive fieldwork took place throughout 2017. We employed a non-random, purposive, and maximum variation sampling method so as to make sure the range of people and sites from which the sample is selected is representative of the larger population geographically, socioeconomically, and politically. Based on this method, we conducted semi-structured in-depth interviews with members of twenty-three women’s cooperatives (see

Supplementary Appendix A for detailed information about our interviewees). In nine of these research sites, we were able to conduct group interviews with multiple members of women’s cooperatives assuming different positions in the cooperatives. Due to their cosmopolitan nature, we conducted multiple interviews in the three biggest cities in Turkey (Istanbul, Ankara, and Izmir), as well as interviews in Eskişehir, Konya, Zonguldak, Trabzon, Artvin, Adıyaman, Gaziantep, Mardin, and Hatay. Figure 1 illustrates the map of provinces where we have conducted our interviews.

For the sake of representativeness, we have taken into consideration geography, socioeconomic class (lower class versus middle class), as well as major social cleavages in Turkey (i.e., Islamist–secularist, Sunni–Alevi, and Turkish–Kurdish) (cf. Özbudun 2013) and have aimed to conduct interviews with representatives of all major social groups. Despite our attempts, we were unable to get in touch with some of the cooperatives in Eastern–Southeastern Anatolia as major women’s cooperatives were closed down in the region (especially in Van and Diyarbakır, which have significant Kurdish populations) under the pretext of the emergency rule declared after the July 15, 2016 failed coup attempt. In spite of this shortcoming, our sample of women’s cooperatives ensures maximum possible variation and representation for the Turkish case (including Kurdish ethnic background in some of the interviewees in our sample).

Many of the cooperatives in our sample were both established and operated by women who were predominantly from lower classes even though



**Figure 1.** Fieldwork map: provinces in which interviews were conducted.

*Note:* The number of interviews conducted in each province is shown in parentheses: Ankara (5), Istanbul (3), Izmir (4), Konya (2), Eskişehir (1), Zonguldak (1), Trabzon (1), Artvin (1), Adıyaman (2), Gaziantep (1), Mardin (1), and Hatay (1).

most of such cooperatives managed to get middle-class women, especially from civil society and universities, to provide support to their organization. In order to ensure that we do not just focus on the success stories of those with the most entrepreneurial spirit, we made sure that we also interviewed members of closed or to-be-closed cooperatives (e.g., Cooperative # 4 in Ankara, Cooperative # 1 in Adiyaman). We contacted almost half of the active cooperatives in Turkey and created a representative sample of women's cooperatives socioeconomically, politically, and geographically.

Individual interviews lasted around an hour, while group interviews lasted around 2–3 hours. To ensure the privacy and anonymity of our respondents, pseudonyms were used. With the respondents' consent, we tape-recorded our interviews and identified key themes based on our findings in linkage with the relevant literature. Based on the views and experiences of members of women's cooperatives, we analyze (1) the macro-institutional conditions (political and economic) that enable or hamper women's empowerment and (2) women's self-perceptions of empowerment by being a member of a cooperative.

## The Institutional Framework for Women's Cooperatives

The institutional structure, with its ministerial agencies, regulations, state–non-governmental partnerships and so forth, provides the basis for how state and non-state actors interact and how societal actors operate in a given country. It is therefore either a catalyst for or an obstacle against women's empowerment. For instance, in tandem with appropriate EU Support Initiatives, European countries such as Greece have set up a General Secretariat for gender equality, and promoted and supported women's cooperatives via tax incentives, action plans, and measures that fit the particularities and competitive advantages of each locality and cooperative (Iakovidou 2002; Koutsou et al. 2003, 49). Women cooperatives in Iran and Nigeria are offered interest-free loans without collateral (Alaedini and Razavi 2005, 69; Onyejekwe 2001, 82). Agricultural cooperatives led by women can acquire communal land from the government to be distributed to their members free of charge in Uganda (Ferguson and Kepe 2011, 427). The South African government initiated a new Cooperatives Act in 2005, which highlights the role of cooperatives (including women's cooperatives) in promoting economic and social progress. The Act includes targeted support programs and appropriate legal status for cooperatives in accordance with international standards (Ortmann and King 2007, 18). Mexican federal government provides women in indigenous areas such as Yucatan with investment funds, which have a very flexible repayment schedule or for some cases no repayment at all (Vazquez et al. 2016, 4).

On the other hand, one of the major obstacles for women's cooperatives throughout the world is “state neglect,” the lack of governmental assistance



(Eccarius-Kelly 2006). In a similar vein, in Turkey, a legal and political framework that encourages women's participation in cooperatives is missing. Public institutions either ignore the demands of women's cooperatives or the support they provide is non-systematic and patronage-based. Behind this approach lies the dominant neoconservative, neoliberal mentality of the ruling party. As the literature also indicates, these two ideological trends reinforce the primarily domestic role assumed for women (Buğra 2014; Buğra and Keyder 2006; Coşar and Yeğenoğlu 2011). While neo conservatism sees women as primarily familial and domestic beings, neoliberalism reinforces this trend by transforming care duties from the state to the women and exposing women to market insecurities. The literature has observed that women's participation in the labor market is mostly informal. This creates problems with regards to a deeper understanding of the extent of women's participation in the labor market and leads to the perpetuation of the "invisible" nature of women's work in piece work jobs and informal employment in general (Dedeoğlu 2010). Home-based work through subcontracting reproduces the gendered structure of the labor market, confining women to low wages, irregular payments, and lack of social and employment security. While women's cooperatives aim to empower women, many are unable to challenge this structure as they continue to tap into the "invisible labor" of women through a focus on home-based production (Dedeoğlu 2012).

Some of the interviewees in our research highlighted the lack of assistance of state and local governing bodies.

Local governing authorities underestimate the value of the women's cooperatives. Without their support, it is getting really hard. Some of the municipalities support the ones that they themselves initiated. They give financial support as well, for instance those cooperatives do not pay rents. (Seval, Trabzon)

We do not know who the interlocutor is. We lack information. The procedures always change. We are living in the city center and I cannot imagine those women who are living in peripheries. (Solmaz, Ankara)

While Seval highlighted the significance of the support provided by municipalities, especially financial ones, Solmaz marked the lack of information given by the authorities throughout the process starting from the establishment of the cooperative. The dearth of financial or informative support mechanisms that ought to be provided by different authorities impede the management of the process. In addition to state support, respondents also mentioned the need for re-regulating legal arrangements.

The UNDP supported us at the establishment stage. Then we built atelier of toys with their support as well. But it must be the state that shall



be there. It is a must to have state's assistance, there shall be legal arrangements. (Yıldız, Gaziantep)

Local governing authorities do not protect us. The laws are not meeting our needs. It is too much for us. Especially the regulation on tax must change. (Nergis, İstanbul)

While the cooperative in Gaziantep received necessary support at the initial stages from the UNDP, the lack of assistance given by the state and the high level of taxes doubled their burden. Women's cooperatives face various financial and legal challenges. According to a recent report by the World Bank, almost half of the women's cooperatives that are currently active list "paying taxes" as one of their main financial challenges (Duguid et al. 2015, 75). The taxation system in Turkey places a significant economic burden on women's cooperatives' shoulders as they are subject to the same arrangement as corporate taxpayers. This problem of tax paying was repeatedly mentioned by the interviewees as "making us miserable," "making us dependent on other fundings," or "without this burden we would had developed more." These financial challenges can be traced back to difficulties with regards to the legal status of women's cooperatives. Women's cooperatives are subject to the Cooperatives Law No. 1163, which has been criticized for its ambiguous classification of, and lack of distinction among various types of cooperatives (Okan and Okan 2013, 15). The Cooperatives Law requires all partners to put a share to join the cooperative. An increase in this amount set and regulated by the state led to loss of members from women's cooperatives, as women were unable to pay the partnership fees. Additionally, the legal expenses that are associated with the startup of a cooperative often create a heavy financial burden for the members (Duguid et al. 2015, 76). Hence, in addition to active and predictable support from the state in the form of cooperation with municipalities or channels of communication with state representatives, members of the cooperatives also demand amendments in the legal arrangements in the form of tax reduction or policy priority status.

For the Turkish case, there have been some supportive, gender-sensitive policies targeted toward women. These include job-training programs (1991–1996), an active labor market program in tandem with the European Commission (2003), vocational training programs to undertake skill training by women for women, and a labor force development program for women by the Turkish Labor Agency (ISKUR) (Gökovalı 2015, 68). Some quotes from our interviewees referred to such resources.

We are working with ISKUR, KOSGEB [SME Development Organization]. At the very beginning we worked with DOKA [Eastern Black Sea Development Agency]. We also participated into training

programs conducted by the KEDV [the Foundation for the Support of Women's Work] as well. Their support is vital. (Hülya, Artvin)

Having support from local bodies and agencies proves significant. Getting support from the mayor is also important. (Nilay, İzmir)

Even though there have been different organizations, including the local authorities and non-state actors, providing support, the overall trend is not promising. Women complain that in general that they did not observe any substantial change in the state's attitude toward women's cooperatives, and that state representatives were not taking the necessary steps on issues such as tax reduction and did not hear their suggestions about facilitating a more hospitable work environment for them.

Furthermore, some state policies actually hurt the efforts of the cooperatives. Cooperatives find it difficult to locate women to work with them because women are concerned that they would lose the social aid they receive from the state. Women would often prefer social aid over the opportunities that would come with joining cooperatives such as secure income, socializing in public, and gaining public visibility. One can see how neoliberalism is at play here since the universal entitlements of a welfare state are replaced by discretionary aids provided to individuals.

The encouragement of home-based production, which is in line with both the neoconservative mentality of the government and the informal working conditions bolstered by neoliberalism, also hurts cooperatives as it confines women to the private sphere stripping them of the emancipatory effects of public life, be it learning new skills, expanding their solidarity network, becoming part of the formal workforce with entitlements to social benefits and so forth (Acar and Altunok 2013, 20; Dedeoğlu 2010, 2012). In addition, the patronage networks (Sayarı 2014) built by the AKP government also result in discretionary funding, especially at the municipal level. A cooperative in Nevşehir, for example, had to vacate the office provided to them by the previous mayor when a new mayor from a different political party came into office. Given the positive role cooperatives play in women's lives, their neglect in public policy is lamentable.

As stated by the representatives of the women's cooperatives, other than the governmental support programs via the State Planning Organization (DPT), the Ministry of Industry and Trade (through the SME-support programs), the Ministry of Education (through vocational training toward women), international organizations such as the UNDP, EU, World Bank, ILO as well as civil society organizations such as the Foundation for the Support of Women's Work (KEDV), the Union of Chambers and Commodity Exchanges of Turkey (TOBB), the Confederation for Tradesmen and Craftsmen in Turkey (TESK), and the Union of Chambers of Turkish Engineers and Architects (TMMOB) function positively to enhance women's

employment in general and specifically for women's cooperatives (see also [Ecevit 2007](#), 4–14).

We received funding from the UN. It was a project on gender. We were also supported by the University as well. And the mayor backed us up. And the KEDV's help was there. They are working as a communication platform. It is vital. (Günay, İzmir)

The UNDP and GAP [Southeastern Anatolia Project] provided important support. They organized training modules. We gained the support of the University as well. (Derya, Mardin)

In many instances, international organizations and civil society organizations provide women's cooperatives with the necessary equipment, machinery for production, as well as sources of marketing (by buying and promoting the goods produced by the cooperatives).

As shown in this section, the support of state institutions is very unsystematic and unpredictable and often depends on political loyalty. What is more, it would be naïve to assume that approaching the problem of gender inequality merely through the lenses of top-down approaches such as policy initiatives would be enough to eradicate the deep inequalities between men and women. As [Altan-Olcay \(2016, 393\)](#) argues, many state- and NGO-sponsored policy initiatives and development programs do not reflect the actual problems in local contexts since their blueprints come from actors and institutions that are not necessarily knowledgeable of local conditions. Furthermore, [Rajagopal and Mathur \(2000, 2910\)](#) evaluate state-sponsored programs to reach out women to empower themselves and argue that there are limitations to bringing social change simply through policy initiatives and changes as these policy measures and “entitlements” do not always bring about “agency” and “achievements” for women.

## Market-Related Problems

We complement our institutional analysis in this section by exploring the effects of market-related dynamics. The neoliberal global economy and fierce competition have led many large companies to outsource part or all of their production to small enterprises such as women's cooperatives. While providing women producers with some cash flow, these outsourcing production methods result in very low pricing and returns and high risks (due to the possibility of replaceability) for women producers ([Jones et al. 2012, 14](#)). In some cases, fierce competition in a capitalist market economy also constitutes a hampering factor for women's empowerment. The story of a closed women's cooperative in Ankara illustrates the results of fierce competition:

We met with a woman one day. She has a shop in one of the major malls in the city centre. She made us her subcontractor. We were against this. But of course, some earned more than the usual system. She doubled the prices for the products. This subcontracting divided us into two. My friends and I were against this system as it exploits women's labor. Collectivity died there. That spirit of togetherness died. She had her own team of producers. (Emek, Ankara)

Other than fierce competition, cooperatives face additional economic problems. These include internal and external free-rider problems (production and sale outside the cooperatives both by members and non-members) and time-horizon problems (benefits generated usually in the long run while costs incurred at the outset) (Ortmann and King 2007, 35–36).

Women want to sell their products at the local bazaars. They think they cannot get enough if they sell them with the cooperative. They sometimes sell their products via internet. (Selma, Eskişehir)

How can we compete while we are paying high taxes and high expenses for annual congress? How can we earn money? There are so many different costs. Then, women want to sell their products at the local bazaar. But this is bargaining through labor. Our mission is to pay what is deserved. Then, what can we do? Shall we organize them? Is it a must? I do not know the answer. Capitalism does not want what is slow. It demands rapid production. But in this case, it crushes who is slow. (Kevser, İzmir)

Members of women's cooperatives, mostly reliant on traditional and local products and usually lacking professional, entrepreneurial skills during times of economic downturns, face steep challenges as the narratives given above illustrate (Göksel 2013, 46). Representatives of the women's cooperatives highlighted this issue of "locality" and the related issue of "market."

Every region has its own local product. But of course, there are other women who are producing that product. On the other hand, we do not have any local product in this district. We will have our own market though. (Günay, İzmir)

We have the problem of market. In Artvin, women do produce these products at their homes. We want to promote the Artvin cuisine. We are visiting each and every village to make advertisements. (Hülya, Artvin)

Exemplified by Günay and Hülya, the market problem affects women's cooperatives especially if their local market lacks "authenticity." In Turkey, some

cities are famous of their cuisine and this perceived popularity of their products puts them in a favored position. This may create a relative (dis)advantage in the market depending on the locality.

At the initial stages of women's cooperatives, many members lack managerial and administrative skills, are unfamiliar with legal issues pertaining to cooperatives, and have few connections and networks to help them set up and run their cooperatives (Peterson 2014, 158). Women's cooperatives, especially those in competitive markets, also face problems about quality control and promotion of their products (Koutsou et al. 2003, 52). In this framework, the following quotes illustrate the problems that women's cooperatives in Turkey face with marketing.

Our most important challenge is marketing. We do not know how to do it. (Ayşe, Ankara)

Marketing is an issue and it is extensive. We are also facing problems of selling. This place has certain limits. Maybe in Ankara, in Istanbul this would be different, we would sell more, I do not know. (Sıdıka, Zonguldak)

In line with Ayşe's and Sıdıka's comments on their lack of marketing skills, scholars underline that women's cooperatives in Turkey face major bottlenecks in the areas of finance, and legislation, along with lack of experience and expertise in commercial life (Özdemir 2013, 303–5). The interviewees hint at the importance of expertise resulted from experiences in the field as well.

Women cannot dare to take risk. Especially, if she is alone. She does not have a name<sup>1</sup> and wallet. She does not know marketing. So many products are getting lost. (Figen, Adıyaman)

As mentioned by Figen, women experience economic difficulties while trying to “be entrepreneurs.” Class stands as a crucial dimension to understand the divergence among experiences of women (McCall and Orloff 2005, 161). The image of “entrepreneurial women” usually contradicts with the “actual women who are expected to undergo an entrepreneurial transformation” (Altan-Olcay 2016, 394). The quote below illustrates the context under which an important number of cooperatives operate:

Our neighborhood is a migrant district. An under-represented, closed and isolated place. . . . Women cannot go out. They have not been supported before. So, we are working for all of them. (Pınar, İstanbul)

Similarly, while well-educated, middle-class women had better access to international funding agencies (e.g. Solmaz, Ankara), those of working-class family

background (e.g. Eskişehir cooperative or Pınar, Istanbul) mentioned that they lacked access to such resources.

Without paying attention to class differences and resultant “unequal distribution of economic, educational, and occupational resources that influence entrepreneurial success” (Altan-Olcay 2016, 394), one may run into unrealistic expectations from women from lower classes with limited educational, economic, and time resources (as is the case for many members of women's cooperatives) and underestimate their gains given the odds against which they work.

## Gender-Related Obstacles

Women, especially in developing countries, are confronted by formidable societal constraints that block their active participation in cooperatives, the first and foremost among these being their traditional role in society and the prevalent misconception that women's reproductive and domestic responsibilities constitute their main role (Nippierd 2012, 2). Women in Turkey have traditionally and historically conducted their roles as they were assigned to them in line with patriarchal demands of the society. Their boundaries have been designed by men and their “deeds, speech acts and physical appearances” in the public sphere have been controlled by through the construction of gender identities (Cindoğlu and Ünal 2015, 468). Traditional gender roles have defined women's role in the private sphere as child raising and alternative life paths challenge her safe zone of being a “good” mother and wife.

I have dedicated myself to my kids. It has been like this for years. Then they grew up and I told to myself that now it is time to set aside time for myself. I told my husband as well. I am not living dependent on my kids anymore. (Filiz, Konya)

There was nobody who could take care of my kids. My neighbor baby-sat for a while. Then my kids started to misbehave. I was sad. Then my husband said “raise your children first, then you can do whatever you want to.” (Esin, İstanbul)

Patriarchal social norms limit women's entry to economic and social life and determine the occupations considered suitable for women (Alaedini and Razavi 2005, 61). In most cases, including Turkey, women do not have full discretion in their employment decisions, which are limited by “social norms, husbands' permission, and care responsibilities” (Göksel 2013, 48).

I never did one single thing without the permission of my husband. But then without telling him I went to a village at the mountain. I was scared a lot at first. I prayed all the way until the village. (Figen, Adıyaman)

Woman cannot get out of home without her husband's permission.  
(Ayşe, Ankara)

In addition to the quotes that exemplify women's subordinated position in the household, their participation in the public sphere has also been determined by men and operated through the surveillance of their sexuality.

When we first came here [Izmir] my husband did not let me work. What an immense amount of pressure I was under. . . . I have worked from home for a while. Then, I have toughened up and opened a small shop. (Günay, İzmir)

The influence of male domination on female labor force participation is greater in bigger cities than rural settings. In rural areas, women have traditionally worked, whereas transition from rural to urban settings makes it harder for women to enter the job market as they face resistance from their husbands (Göksel 2013, 51–2).

First, my husband objected a lot. He told me that “you are signing [financial documents for the cooperative] something, you may be put on trial.” (Nergis, İstanbul)

As the quote above illustrates, traditional gender roles make most women dependent on their husband's or father's discretion. Many living in cosmopolitan cities face this barrier explicitly or implicitly. Furthermore, in light of Kabeer's analytical framework for women's empowerment, women's entry to labor markets can only facilitate “resources” but may not bring “agency” or “achievements” for women. While having the potential to empower them in several ways, women's entrepreneurial activities can at times “consolidate hierarchical gender roles because they [may] fail to problematize existing gender norms that inform the invisibility and unequal performance of social reproductive labor” (Altan-Olcay 2016, 392).

There is no time for the kids. They grew up anyway but there is not enough time for them. (Esma, Eskişehir)

It is hard to make young women join us, it is not happening. Where can they leave their kids? That's why, generally, retired women come to the cooperatives. But it is important to make young ones get out of home. But raising a child you know . . . (Aynur, İzmir)

As Esma and Aynur exemplify, the care burden “remains essentialized and unchallenged” in many instances, forcing women to shoulder a double burden



both at work and home, and representatives of the women's cooperatives confirm the perils of the double shift (Altan-Olcay 2016, 393; see also Öneş et al. 2013). Macro-institutional framework and societal dynamics constitute the background against which women's cooperatives aim to achieve their goals despite multiple obstacles, especially for women from underprivileged sections of the society.

## Contributions of Women's Cooperatives to Women's Empowerment: Differences and Similarities among Cooperatives

In spite of the institutional and societal challenges faced, women's cooperatives provide many women with several gains which contribute to their empowerment. In this section, we explore these gains through the eyes of members of women's cooperatives.

### A Contextualized Analysis for Women's Empowerment

The benefits of women's cooperatives toward women's empowerment may vary in degree even within the same cooperative due to diverse pre-existing socio-economic standards and living conditions (Ferguson and Kepe 2011, 428). Likewise, different cooperatives may result in different levels and kinds of achievements for women. Koutsou et al. (2003, 50–1) find that women's cooperatives that have been the most helpful to their members and the society at large have at least one of the following factors: (1) a nucleus of women who are particularly active and have leadership skills, (2) a local agent who encourages and supports women's cooperatives actively, and (3) a bottom-up approach in their establishment and operations.

In line with our attention to nuances of empowerment and varying spatial, social, cultural contexts, we adopt a framework offered by Woolcock and Narayan (2000) which offers a model about how cooperatives develop social capital through “bonding” and “bridging.” Bonding refers to the development of stronger social ties (networks, norms, and trust) among members of like-minded, homogenous groups. On the other hand, bridging refers to connecting and communicating with members of other social groups and developing stronger networks, norms, and trust among diverse social groups. For the advancement of resource-limited communities, both bonding and bridging are necessary (Majee and Hoyt 2011, 53). In Woolcock and Narayan's (2000, 232) framework, bonding can be necessary and sufficient for “getting by” (i.e. escaping destitution) yet it should be coupled with bridging for “getting ahead” to surpass a certain threshold of welfare.

In an illustrative example, Vazquez et al. (2016) discuss cooperatives formed by Maya women in Yucatan, Mexico. The authors show that the cooperatives under analysis led women to cope with economic hardships by

bonding mechanisms. However, since these women cannot communicate with other social groups (due to language barriers) and develop stronger networks by bridging, they cannot advance themselves enough to fully escape poverty (Vazquez et al. 2016, 8). In a similar vein, Eccarius-Kelly (2006) examines a women's cooperative in Guatemala City, Guatemala and underlines that through bonding mechanisms, members of the *Unidas Para Vivir Mejor* (United for a Better Life) women's cooperative cope with challenges in the areas of education, health, and food provision. However, without bridging to other social groups and organizations, they remain reliant on financial support from international aid agencies and private fundraising groups (Eccarius-Kelly 2006, 38). On the other hand, Peterson (2014, 160–1) discusses how the *Hijas Del Mar* (Daughters of the Sea) Cooperative in Baja California Sur, Mexico utilizes external networks such as NGOs and business partners to expand its operations. This is a prime example of the impact of bridging on the success of women's cooperatives and enhanced empowerment for their members.

In our research, we also observe that women's cooperatives with higher degrees of bonding are more able to offer empowerment to their members compared to those with lower degrees of bonding. Two stories below from two different cooperatives offer snapshots of the negative results caused by the lack of bonding.

There were fights. We, the ones who did take the training on violence, could not succeed on this. Some of our friends showed physical violence. There was no auto-control. There was polarization. It was like a football match between two eternal rivals. Or it was like a divorce. We fought hard on the machines, on the name of the cooperative. . . . It was like a trial on custody of the kids. We lost it. (Emek, Ankara)

There was tension among us. Some women criticized my low-neck blouse or my short skirt. There were fights over these issues. (Esin, Istanbul)

Furthermore, we maintain that women's cooperatives with high degrees of both bonding and bridging will have considerably higher impact on their member's empowerment as compared to those lacking bonding and bridging, especially the latter.

This place is our home, our child. We cannot abandon it. We learned solidarity, unity. We learned to become us, not me. (Selma, Eskişehir)

Monthly meetings are held in İzmir. Communication among cooperatives are crucial. Our bond is also very good. We are a family. We are each other's husband, children. This dialogue and environment is the most important thing. (İclal, İzmir)

We held onto each other. We challenged difficulties in this manner. On top of it, we collaborated with other cooperatives. We shared experiences. Our friends from other cooperatives provided valuable ideas. We are going to revisit them next week. (Ayşe, Ankara)

We created communication web among cooperatives. We organized far-reaching meetings. KEDV set up a national database. Communication got easier this way. (Gönül, Hatay)

As can be seen, women strengthen their existing ties and were bonded more strongly as a result of their experiences in the cooperatives. They had to go through experiences such as taking credit from banks in their own names (Eskişehir) without their husbands' knowledge which brought these women closer together. They also shared a sense of solidarity which encouraged some of them to go back to school or get out of an abusive marriage (e.g. Cooperative # 4, Ankara). What is more, women in cooperatives have learnt to reach outside their circles and became part of wider networks thanks to their communications with other cooperatives and organizations such as KEDV.

Another crucial form of bridging, especially for low-trust, highly polarized countries such as Turkey (Kalaycıoğlu 2012; Tepe 2013), concerns reaching beyond majority groups so as to include people of different ethnic and sectarian background. Responses by women to the question of whether they made an effort to reach women of different backgrounds such as Kurds and Alevi have indicated that reaching different women from different segments of the society has been a priority for some of the women's cooperatives that we interviewed.

We thought a lot on how to reach different women. How can we touch them? For instance, reaching a Kurdish woman. . . . Differences are not important on the ground of production. It is richness. (Solmaz, Ankara)

It is vital to integrate different women. We did integrate them into the phase of production. (Derya, Mardin)

We have place for different voices of different women here, not multi-headedness. (Kevser, İzmir)

In a similar vein, people from different class backgrounds were also reached by many cooperatives as the following quote exemplifies. For example, cooperatives brought together university graduates and academics as well as women of working-class background.

Our partners are coming from different social classes and places. There are women coming from various neighborhoods. Educated,

uneducated, retired, working or even there are women who had never gone out without permission. (Nilay, İzmir)

Yet, compared to bridging, bonding seems to be a more common practice for women's cooperatives. In some of the cases, we were told by the respondents that being from the same hometown (*hemşehrilik*) played an important role in how the cooperatives functioned. For example, Emek (Ankara) told us that women who came from the same locality were sticking together and took decisions together. She said that it was not their sectarian identity (being Alevi) that made the difference—as she was Alevi too—but rather that they came from the same village originally. Also, in another cooperative we were told that the best solution (Cooperative # 2, Ankara) found was to make their daughters and relatives to join the cooperative in order to facilitate more efficiency and smooth decision making in the cooperative.

These quotes from different women refer to the importance of bonding and bridging and evince how they result in the betterment of the cooperatives. In the next subsections, we delve into their economic, psycho-social, and organizational benefits. We note that these benefits are not mutually exclusive and may interact and bring about higher achievements for women.

### **Economic Benefits and Empowerment**

Women's cooperatives provide full- or part-time employment to a significant number of local women who have no other job opportunities, including those who lack the formal qualifications (age, education) necessary to be employed, as well as the capital or self-esteem necessary to start a business of their own (Koutsou et al. 2009, 205). They lead to economic empowerment through providing women with greater access to and control over economic resources and opportunities (Jones et al. 2012, 15). In comparison to individual and usually informal ways of employment, economic benefits of women's cooperatives that enable economic empowerment are improved incomes for women, greater ability to diversify into alternative sources of income, shared knowledge to improve products, expanded markets and marketing, stronger negotiation power, achieving economies of scale via combining their resources, better access to financial resources, and training (Jones et al. 2012, 20–4).

Women are creative. Their source of power lies in their creativity. They should know this. A bus driver owns a bus, a milkman owns a cow. Women have their creativity. (Ayşenur, İzmir)

There are some who say “Thanks to this place, I earn a living for the family, provide education for my child.” (Filiz, Konya)

A woman who was hesitant to touch the cash register now knows how to make an invoice and measure withholding tax. (Yıldız, Gaziantep).

Against this backdrop, we argue that Filiz's quote epitomizes an aspect of women's empowerment through cooperatives: becoming the breadwinner of the household. Although this would be naïve to read such statement as an invasion into men's sphere, this echoes an important phase of empowerment.

### Psychological and Social Benefits and Empowerment

The benefits of women's cooperatives surpass tangible monetary benefits and include considerable psychological and social achievements in women's empowerment. Psycho-social enhancements and resultant enhancements in women's empowerment via cooperatives include higher self-confidence, better critical thinking and decision making, enhanced vision of future, mobility, and visibility, heightened decision making in the household, improved status in social circles, ability to interact effectively in the public sphere, and participation and solidarity in nonfamily groups (Datta and Gailey 2012, 581; Jones et al. 2012, 15; Onyejekwe 2001, 72; Özdemir 2013, 300).

Empirical evidence from around the world also verifies these gains. Based on fieldwork in Nicaragua, Bacon (2010, 61) argues that becoming members of women's cooperatives helps women manage their own lives and achieve considerably higher discretion in their households' decisions. In her research about a women's cooperative in Baja California Sur, Mexico, Peterson (2014, 162–3) underlines how members of the cooperative first struggled with the machismo culture, gender roles that limit them, criticisms, and even insults targeted toward them simply because they are moving out of the domestic realm. Yet, the “Daughters of the Sea” women resisted such pressures and established themselves and their womanhood in the public realm. In parallel, the respondents of our research voiced varying stories and phases of the empowerment in Turkey.

Woman's social environment has changed a lot. Her acquaintances have changed. Her husband has become timid compared to her you know? Her self-confidence boosted. (Solmaz, Ankara)

I've started out with nothing. I studied, found a job, tried very hard. My husband did not let me go out of home. My kids were small. My family did not support me at all. But now everything has changed. (Nilgün, Ankara)

We are working as a bridge. What is important is to make them [members] experience life. We saw how balance within the family has changed. Their visibility and status have increased. These are the most important achievements for us. (Gönül, Hatay)

The aim was to make women visible in the public sphere. It happened so. They went out of home, they greeted with someone in the streets,

smelled a flower. . . . They are more outgoing now. I think now they are breathing again. (Pınar, İstanbul)

I bloomed like a daisy. Daisy is my symbol now. I have hand-knit a daisy into my baby doll. I used to ask my father's permission, now, I am just letting them know. (Kevser, İzmir)

These quotations exemplify how women through the cooperatives went beyond the pre-ascribed patriarchal limits. In particular, the story of Kevser summarizes the importance of empowerment and agential intervention into spaces such as cooperatives. The interviewees listed concrete achievements such as enrolling in training programs, graduating from school, learning how to drive, how to use a machine but especially the symbolic reference to "learning how to breathe" epitomizes different voices' way of empowerment at varying phases.

Further evidence from other interviews underline that the benefits of women's cooperatives toward women's empowerment are well beyond the cooperatives' economic operations. In one interview, a member told us that she felt proud of herself because she could earn her own money even though she was not in need of money (Cooperative # 1 in Konya, Interview with Suna). Another one maintained that due to joining the cooperative she gained self-confidence and became a more sociable person as she joined group trips and started to go to fairs (Cooperative # 1 in Zonguldak, Interview with Sila). The head of Cooperative # 1 in Izmir observed changes "that would bring tears to one's eyes" as they saw women who were not allowed to go to even to their neighbors starting to attend the cooperative and join trips. One member realized that she contributed a lot to the household budget as a result of a workshop provided by the cooperative showing the worth of their domestic labor and thereby got rid of her inferiority complex (Cooperative # 2 in Izmir, Interview with Günay). All of this evidence corroborates the substantial psychological and social benefits that women's cooperatives offer to their members.

### **Organizational Benefits and Empowerment**

Along with the aforementioned economic, psychological, and social benefits, women's cooperatives may foster women's negotiating skills, as well as their ability to serve their communities through transferring skills to fellow members and non-members (Ferguson and Kepe 2011, 421). Participation in women's cooperatives enables women to have access to new resources and markets, develop relationships, and overcome gender constraints (Jones et al. 2012, 13). The following quotations stress the effect of network building;

I met with the governor. I met with the district governor for buck-wheat. I met with the chairman of chamber of commerce. I thought we can seek help for the machinery by this way. (Nilgün, Ankara)

We have grown through my network. I have businessman friends. I asked from them. I am calling the president to support a friend when they need. We are growing by inviting everyone. We are getting stronger. (İclal, İzmir)

Studies show that membership of women's cooperatives increases the dissemination of innovative production techniques among women (Deji 2005, 146). Peterson (2014, 155) also argues that members of women's cooperatives have heightened confidence to interact with government agencies due to the collective nature of women's cooperatives. As Majee and Hoyt (2011, 52) argue, "cooperatives expand the ability of groups to participate in, negotiate with, influence, control, and hold accountable the institutions that effect their lives." The quotations from the interviewees also offer evidence as to how women have bargained with the existing political institutions.

We used to say yes to anything. Then we learnt to say but. We voiced our reservations. We insisted on what we wanted. We learnt to express ourselves. (Selma, Eskişehir)

We are challenging the legal conditions. The KEDV supports us as well. We are also in contact with the Ministry. (Pinar, İstanbul)

As Nippierd (2012, 1) aptly maintains, "in many developing countries women work individually, often isolated, in the informal economy, operating at a low level of activity and reaping marginal income." Being members of women's cooperatives can certainly provide the momentum for them to create the economic, social, and political leverage they need. An extract from Nilay's story provides a focus on an aspect of empowerment which is derived from widening of maneuvering spaces:

Through the women's cooperative, we have become a part of the life. I have never been a part of it before. I was sitting at home and waiting. Then, after coming here and getting involved, I started to go everywhere, any places. We are going to meetings, we are expressing our needs, demands. (Nilay, İzmir)

## **Women's Cooperatives and Women's Empowerment: A Roadmap for the Turkish Case and Beyond**

The findings show us that women's cooperatives fulfill important functions at multiple levels. First, they create an emancipatory potential as they create economic benefits for women which can help them become more autonomous from their families. The gains go beyond the economy, however, as women



start to feel psychologically more empowered due to the new roles they assume in the cooperatives and due to the social interactions they build as part of their roles. Women also gain organizational and administrative skills which make them more “literate” in the public sphere. They build stronger bonds and reach out to women of different background as well as to other organizations. From what women tell us, most of the time these transformations in their public lives also transfer to their interactions within the families as they maintain that they feel that their husbands and children respect them more now.

Despite the potential that these cooperatives carry, however, women face systematic struggles every day, which brought many cooperatives to the brink of being shut down. These struggles are an amalgam of patriarchal expectations that still do not wish to open the public space for women as well as neo-liberal economic conditions that encourage an uneven and unsystematic contribution of women to the workforce and see harsh competition and market insecurities as the norm.

This article has intended to pinpoint all of the potentially transformative effects of women’s cooperatives on women’s lives and their empowerment, possible obstacles ahead, and how women can (and sometimes cannot) overcome these obstacles. To this end, the article aims to contribute to the relevant literature on women’s cooperatives, women’s empowerment, and gender politics by carefully exploring and presenting the extent and nature of empowerment achieved by women through cooperatives.

At the policymaking level, women’s cooperatives have the potential to bring about positive changes both for their members and society at large. As [Majee and Hoyt \(2011, 48\)](#) maintain, “cooperatives can be an effective participatory strategy to bootstrap low-income people into the socio-economic mainstream, particularly in resource limited communities.” There are many economic, psychological, social, and organizational benefits harnessed by women’s cooperatives at the individual and community levels. Thus, women’s cooperatives should be at the heart of policymaking for a more egalitarian and prosperous society. In more concrete terms, financial policy instruments in the form of tax reductions or low-interest loans can be given to women’s cooperatives. The state can also coordinate the market for these cooperatives by providing a platform where buyers and sellers can come together. A similar platform would be applicable to bringing together NGOs and women’s cooperatives. Even a database of access to resources or best practices can help as many respondents told us they do not know where to start when it comes to such issues. The lack of such practices can better be explained by a lack of political will rather than economic resources.

The Turkish case under analysis sheds light not only on strictly patriarchal cases in which women’s role in civic, economic, and political life is reduced to their motherhood and caregiving roles but also on women’s struggles in other parts of the world regarding their fair share in the society against the backdrop of harsh neoliberal conditions, which offer them only informal jobs or jobs

with meager earnings without any social security. However, as this article has shown, women's cooperatives could be pioneers in creating a new gender discourse in patriarchal and neoliberal societies throughout the world by enabling economic independence, psychological gains, and social solidarity for their members and standing as an example for other women. To this end, women's individual and collective actions within their cooperatives should be hailed as these actions open up new avenues of struggles and gains toward a more equal society.

## Notes

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1. “Woman Does Not Have a Name” is the title of a book written by a prominent Turkish feminist Duygu Asena in 1987. The title of the book has become the motto of feminism in Turkey for that period.

## Supplementary Data

Supplementary data are available at *SOCPOL* online.

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