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# Women's Empowerment via Women's Cooperatives: An Ethnographic Account from Turkey

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This article explores the potential of women's cooperatives for women's empowerment in patriarchal societies. The article is based on extensive ethnographic research in Kastamonu, Turkey, where one of the researchers has become an active member of a women's cooperative for a full year. The article underlines that women's cooperatives offer unique and valuable opportunities for the advancement of women's rights and gender equality despite the patriarchal norms and social reproduction duties that women face. However, as the article suggests, the gains and experiences of women from women's cooperatives and their empowerment potential are context-dependent, and are contingent upon the individual characteristics of their members based on their social class, educational background, and active participation in the cooperatives.

*Key words:* women's cooperatives; women's empowerment; social reproduction; patriarchy; gender equality; Turkey.

## Introduction

Women face a multitude of challenges in their daily lives across the globe. When women aspire to overcome these challenges and reach new heights, they are often met with the formidable obstacle of gender inequality. It is thus crucial for women to recognize that they have the ability to overcome barriers, especially when they act together. Based on the extensive scholarly literature on gender equality and women's empowerment, this article explores the case of a women's cooperative in Turkey, how it affects the livelihoods of its members, and to what extent they achieve empowerment via their cooperative. The article is based on an in-depth and novel ethnographic research, in

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which one of the authors of the article became an active member of such a cooperative and partook in its daily activities for a full year. The findings of our research will hopefully contribute to the relevant literatures and offer original inferences and solutions toward more egalitarian societies.

The central research question that we explore in our research is as follows: how can participation in a women's cooperative transform the lifestyles, gender identity, and agency of the women involved? We try to address this question by delving into different aspects of women's participation in women's cooperatives.

The structure of the article is as follows. The first section presents our theoretical framework. The second section offers our research context. The third section illustrates the specifics of our methodology, including details about data collection and data analysis. The fourth section pinpoints our empirical findings via the main themes of our research. The fifth section offers further discussion of our research findings within the contours of the existing literature as well as our study's contributions to the literature. The last section concludes.

## Theoretical framework

We first present the main theoretical pillars of our research. Gender studies focusing on the Global South highlight regional particularities regarding inequality outcomes in Latin America, Africa, and Asia, while also underlining major commonalities in the main types of gender regimes across the board (Bose 2023). Those scholarly works on the Global South usually assume a "gender and development (GAD) approach" that examines specific development issues such as food production and violence against women (Rai 2013).

Some of these studies shed valuable insights into different forms of women's entrepreneurship such as micro-credit programs and women's cooperatives (Datta and Gailey 2012; Datta and Nath Sahu 2022). However, as the critical literature toward the GAD approaches aptly suggests, these "entrepreneurship" initiatives through micro-credit or cooperatives tend to maintain the sexual division of productive and reproductive labor in the Global South (Chant 2012; Altan-Olcay 2014, 2016; Cornwall and Rivas 2015; Bakker and Gill 2019; Ugur-Cinar et al. 2022). Following these critical approaches and assuming a feminist, social reproduction theory approach, this article explores the extent of women's empowerment in women's cooperatives in a case study that would be typically characterized by the gender regimes and inequalities in the Global South. Hence, we hope that this research will be illuminating not only for the case at hand, but also for other comparable cases throughout the Global South.

To begin with, we first conceptualize the notion of women's empowerment. Earlier notions of women's empowerment focus on issues such as equal

pay and women's representation in political bodies (Rathgeber 1990; Moser 1993). The GAD approach also tries to operationalize women's empowerment via different indicators such as enhanced human and social assets and decision-making (Miedema et al. 2018). According to this approach, the language of "gender equality" and "women's empowerment," which was first mobilized by feminists in the 1980–1990s, was later embraced by several international NGOs, donor governments, and multilateral agencies (Cornwall and Rivas 2015).

The concept of "women's empowerment" is initially built around the notion of "power" (Batliwala 1994), although this notion mainly focused on the acquisition of power via the accumulation and preservation of material assets and intellectual resources in social, political, and economic spheres of life. Later studies also focus on the salience of institutions and contextual conditions that shape whether and how women are empowered (Alkire et al. 2013).

In our article, we mainly adopt Kabeer's conceptualization of women's empowerment as it offers the most holistic approach to the issue concerning the commonalities between these aforementioned definitions. According to Kabeer (2005, 13), the term empowerment is built around the notion of power. To be empowered, a person should be disempowered first, meaning that she is denied the ability to make choices in the first place, and then she will be empowered only if she acquires "the ability to make choices." Consequently, "empowerment entails a process of change" (Kabeer 1999, 437).

According to Kabeer, empowerment can be conceptualized in terms of three interrelated, indivisible dimensions: resources, agency, and achievements. Material (i.e. land, housing, and cash), human (i.e. education, labor power), and social resources (i.e. networks and relationships) are the first medium required to pursue one's goals. Agency, the second dimension of empowerment, represents the capacity of a person to make her own choices and to put them into effect (Kabeer 1999, 438; Kabeer 2005, 14). The third dimension of empowerment is achievements. Resources and agency constitute together the people's capabilities, representing the potential for living lives however they want. Achievements are directly related to the concrete outcomes of choice that resemble the extent to which the potential is realized (Kabeer 2005, 15). Without concrete outcomes in one's life—that is, achievements—solely attaining resources and agency would not result in empowerment (such as merely having educational attainment without its direct and positive repercussions in one's life).

Based on the literature, women's empowerment can be categorized into subcategories of social, economic, political, psychological, and organizational empowerment (Janssens 2010; Jones, Smith, and Wills 2012; Sundstrom et al. 2017; Cinar et al. 2021). All of these subcategories of empowerment are interconnected to each other. In our research, we mainly focus on social, economic, psychological, and organizational notions of empowerment as our principal unit of inquiry, that is, women's cooperatives, usually result in empowerment in these areas. Existing studies on women's cooperatives throughout the world

maintain that they enhance women's empowerment by providing improved economic standards for women, greater opportunities for socialization beyond one's household, heightened self-esteem and self-worth among women, and augmented organizational capabilities both for women and their cooperatives through bonding and bridging mechanisms (Ferguson and Kepe 2011; Goldman and Little 2015; Cinar et al. 2021).

Women's empowerment is a multidimensional and contextual concept that encompasses social relations among women, groups of people, and institutions (Kabeer 2005). According to social reproduction theory, patriarchal norms and values are embedded in capitalism, which alters all power relations and dynamics, including women's empowerment (Bhattacharya 2017). While capitalism divides productive labor (creating goods and services) and reproductive labor (creating and sustaining life), labor according to social reproduction theory is not only productive in the sense of creating economic value, but also of creating society—the social aspect—or life itself. In this sense, capitalism perpetuates and furthers inequalities between men and women in patriarchal societies by putting the "double burden" of both productive and reproductive labor on the shoulders of women (Bakker 2007; Luxton 2014; Fraser 2017; Bakker and Gill 2019). An inquiry of women's cooperatives via the lens of social reproduction theory and whether these cooperatives can bring about change and women's empowerment despite the societal challenges discussed above could be fruitful in these lines of research as many women joining these cooperatives face hardships both at home and in the workplace, as well predicted by social reproduction theory. To this end, this theory will be our theoretical compass throughout our research to better understand the processes of women's empowerment—or the lack thereof—in women's cooperatives.

## Research context

The extensive fieldwork we have conducted took place in Turkey.[1] Before we delve into the specifics of our research, it would be wise to present how Turkey could be situated within the ongoing debates in the world regarding gender issues. To this end, Turkey stands as a "typical case" that offers ample opportunities to analyze different shapes and forms of gender (in)equality and patriarchy.

Although early Republican elites in Turkey since the 1920s made significant efforts toward women's rights and freedoms, women in the country still lack true liberation and remain only partially emancipated (Kandiyoti 1988). According to Alemdaroğlu (2015), while women have benefited from rights and freedoms in Turkey, their participation in employment, education, and politics has not fully translated into progress toward gender equality. According to the most recent Global Gender Gap Index 2024, Turkey ranks

127th out of 146 countries after Saudi Arabia and before Fiji. Thus, Turkey's state of women's empowerment is an issue that needs to be addressed and discussed, considering pressing gender inequalities.

The feminist literature on women's empowerment indicates that women in Turkey, regardless of their location or social status, encounter various obstacles in their daily lives due to traditional, patriarchal gender norms, roles, and institutions (Erman, Kalaycıoğlu, and Rittersberger-Tılıç 2002; Beşpınar 2010; Cinar and Kose 2018; Cinar and Ugur-Cinar 2018). The persistence of the male-breadwinner family model results in the institutionalization of the gendered labor divisions and low women's labor force participation (İlkkaracan 2012).

Neoliberal ideologies also interact with ideas of labor, responsibility, and gender, which further gender inequalities in the Turkish case (Altan-Olcay 2014). Intersectional class dynamics further deteriorate this issue, by hindering gender equality and the status of women, especially among the lower classes of society (Beşpınar 2010; Altan-Olcay 2016). Women from lower social classes who have to work in informal jobs or positions with meagre earnings face even steeper challenges in their livelihoods (Erman, Kalaycıoğlu, and Rittersberger-Tılıç 2002; Beşpınar 2010).

This has been particularly the case after the right-wing, Islamist Justice and Development Party (AKP) rose to power in 2002. With the rising dominance of AKP rule, the marriage of neoliberalism and neoconservative familism manifested its Islamist political ideology most prominently in gender policies (Acar and Altunok 2013; Cinar and Kose 2018). The dependent status of women has been reinforced by AKP rule as women have been perceived and promoted as natural caregivers alongside neoliberal transformations of welfare and employment regimes (Buğra and Yakut-Çakar 2010; Acar and Altunok 2013; Kandiyoti 2016). The AKP era has been marked by the emergence of a "new mode of patriarchy [that merges] neoliberal, nationalist and religious discourses" that is even more restraining than the existing modes of patriarchy in Turkey (Coşar and Yeğenoğlu 2011).

Despite these hardships, women in Turkey from different social classes and backgrounds still strive to cope with patriarchy and inequalities by trying to overcome the deep and steep structural and institutional obstacles they face in all facets of life (Erman, Kalaycıoğlu, and Rittersberger-Tılıç 2002; Beşpınar 2010; Cinar and Ugur-Cinar 2018). To this end, since their inception in 1999, many women's cooperatives in Turkey have become hotbeds of women's struggle for equality and equity. Studies show that women's cooperatives have enabled many women in Turkey to feel empowered in a range of socioeconomic and political localities and settings (Cinar et al. 2021).

This article focuses on one of these women's cooperatives in Turkey and analyzes how it affects the livelihoods of its members, whether it empowers them, and what problems it copes with in the face of patriarchy and gender inequality. Based on novel, extensive ethnographic research, this article aims to contribute to the relevant debates in the feminist literature uniquely by offering valuable

insights about the inner workings of women's organizations and how these insights could help us better understand the dynamic and intricate nature of women's empowerment and gender equality in patriarchal societies. In a way, one of the main contributions of this research is to complicate existing theories on women's cooperatives, by showing that they are neither perfect engines of "empowerment" nor simple sites of patriarchal reproduction.

As part of the research, one of the coauthors of this research organized an extensive fieldwork as a year-long study (between January 2021 and January 2022), with three months of pre-fieldwork phase and nine months of fieldwork in Kastamonu.[2] The researcher conducted her fieldwork in Kastamonu Sarı Konak Women's Cooperative. Since it is vital for ethnographic researchers to have prior knowledge about the language and cultural codes of the community, the choice of Kastamonu province for this research was intentional as the researcher's ancestors are originally from Kastamonu and she is quite accustomed to the customs and cultural codes of the local community. This has proven very enriching to better grasp the semiotic nature of ethnographic research and have very high immersion in the society at hand (Geertz 1973). For a year in the field, the researcher became a full member of the aforementioned women's cooperative and spent a minimum of three days per week (usually even longer) at the cooperative. The cooperative does not operate as a regular workplace that is open every day of the week since the working days are determined by either production orders or restaurant reservations. However, since the members decided to keep the cooperative open for three days a week, they meet at the cooperative to clean or to develop their products.

Kastamonu Sarı Konak Women's Cooperative was founded on December 10, 2018, in memory of the first women's rally held in Kastamonu in 1919. The founder of the cooperative is still the head of the cooperative and responsible for all the legal and financial procedures of the cooperative. Sarı Konak Women's Cooperative (hereafter referred to as the Konak Cooperative) is an all-women cooperative with fifty-three registered members and is located in a three-floor historic mansion (*konak* in Turkish) close to Kastamonu Castle. The Konak Cooperative offers catering services in the mansion and sells organic foods (such as noodles (*erişte*), dried fruits, syrup (*pekmez*)), as well as garments that are produced through a traditional local method of wood print in the textile workshop that operates in the cooperative.

The members of the Konak Cooperative are from the low and middle social classes. The members include peasants, home-based producers, housewives, individual women entrepreneurs, shop owners, and retired women who assume administrative responsibilities of the cooperative. They have divergent levels of education from primary school to university degrees (though most have lower levels of educational attainment). The average age of women members in the cooperative is forty-nine, which is quite high, because women can only participate in the cooperative after they raise their children enough to

take care of themselves (for a similar discussion for other women's cooperatives in Turkey, see Cinar et al. 2021; Ugur-Cinar et al. 2022).

While some of the members of the cooperative are active members, others are only registered members to support their women fellows, participate in social gatherings, and provide help if needed in the production processes without expecting any economic gain. According to a rule that was adopted during the establishment of the cooperative, members get their share of income only if they participate in the production process. During the fieldwork, the researcher has met with a total of twenty-two members of the cooperative, all of whom are included in the research. The socioeconomic and demographic characteristics of these members are illustrated in detail in Supplementary Appendix A (note: all of the names throughout the research are pseudonyms to ensure the privacy of the individuals).

## Methodology

Ethnographic fieldwork was chosen as the methodology of the research, which integrates the researcher into the process. Ethnography as a research method is mainly an anthropological approach that aims to analyze the social construction of human reality and observe the daily lives of individuals in their daily routines by the researcher by becoming a part of the community and their daily routines (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007; Wedeen 2010). The purpose here is not only to gather information, but also to become a part of that community by living with them under the same conditions, and by acting in similar manners to get a more comprehensive or in-depth analysis of their daily lives (Laitin 2006; Murchison 2010). Thus, the analysis of the fieldwork is based on the observations and interpretations of the researcher's life and work experience (Laitin 2006; Wedeen 2010; Swain and King 2022).

In this research, participant observation is utilized as a strategy of inquiry, which made the researcher also a research instrument during the study by becoming a member of the women's cooperative. According to the literature, participation observation opens new, unique doors for the researcher to access information that is hard to obtain otherwise (Murchison 2010; Swain and King 2022). For our case, women's empowerment is defined and operationalized as a process and as a contextual phenomenon. Thus, working in a women's cooperative as a participant observant appears to be the most appropriate way to analyze the process of empowerment in such a social context.

Throughout the fieldwork, the researcher utilized field notes as a data collection method by keeping daily journals at the end of the day about her observations and conversations with the members of the community under inquiry (Atkinson and Hammersley 1994; Angrosino and Rosenberg 2011).

In this research, nothing could have facilitated the acceptance of the participant observer as a member of the group more than being a woman. The

researcher introduced herself to the cooperative's members as a young woman academic eager to strengthen her bonds with Kastamonu's cultural codes and traditions and assist her fellow women in running their business. During the first two months of the research, the members of the cooperative treated the researcher as a guest. This newcomer was younger than them with a high education degree, but she was cleaning floors, washing dishes, serving guests in the restaurant, singing, dancing with them, and walking around gossiping and complaining as they did. Eventually, they included her in the group as a daughter or sister, whom they scolded when necessary or guided when appropriate. Despite having higher education, this young woman was perceived as lacking traditional feminine skills and became a project for them, someone who needed to be guided and trained.

For data analysis, thematic analysis is employed for the research which focuses on the repeated patterns in the dataset and tracks matching patterns in data to a particular theory or conceptual explanation (Clarke and Braun 2017; Lochmiller 2021). Based on these guidelines, we develop initial themes in light of "prior and emergent theory" and then go back and forth between primary data and existing scholarship in an attempt to analyze data and provide novel theoretical insights from the data (Riessman 2007). The data analysis in our research is thus reiterative, as it moves "back and forth between theory and empirical data" (Wodak 2004, 200).

The themes of the research that emerged after analyzing data collected throughout the fieldwork are as follows: participation in women's cooperatives, women's agency, the perceptions of womanhood, and social reproductive duties and responsibilities. We divide these themes into two parts concerning the conceptual and theoretical framework of the study. While the first two themes of the study revolve around the conceptualization of women's empowerment, the last two are related to the theoretical framework of the study, which is to understand women's inferior status in society due to their social reproduction duties.

## Empirical findings

### Women's participation in women's cooperatives

The findings of the study show that there are numerous factors affecting women's participation in cooperatives. Women's cooperatives are good alternatives for women who do not have special skills to work outside the home for three reasons: (1) flexible working hours that allow the members to sustain their reproductive responsibilities; (2) women generally produce food products, garments, etc., in the cooperative that they already make in their everyday routines; and (3) women prefer working in a women's cooperative since all of the members are women, which helps to convince their husbands to work outside the home and makes them feel more secure and comfortable.

In this women's cooperative, women can communicate freely, make jokes, sing, dance, and can talk about anything including their personal and familial problems. The ones wearing headscarves can take them off because no men are part of the Konak Cooperative. For instance, according to Nehir, who lives with her two sons and husband, the cooperative is a men-free zone, and "it is a good way of life free from their never-ending demands and complaints."

Factors affecting women's participation vary greatly amongst the members of the cooperative except one. Social reproduction responsibilities are the only common factor affecting women's decision to participate in the cooperative. Since women have children and domestic responsibilities to take care of, they are not free to make decisions to work outside the home. Only three of the active members were working outside the home, and only after they retired did they decide to participate in a cooperative. The motivation behind their participation in the cooperative was not only to earn additional income, but also to socialize, to spend their free time being helpful to other women, and to finally use their creativity to create something nice, new, and useful, both for themselves and other women.

All the members of the Konak Cooperative are somehow acquainted with each other as neighbors, friends from school years, relatives, and fellows from the same village, except two. Fatma and Hayriye are the only ones who did not have a prior link with any members of the cooperative. They live in the neighborhood where the Konak Cooperative is located, and it was an opportunity for them to participate in an activity just a short walk from their homes.

When analyzing women's participation in the cooperative, we identify three versions of participation: active participation, passive/intermittent participation, and non-participation[3]. We claim that participation in women's cooperatives does not have the same empowering effect on all the members of the cooperative. It depends on how often and how actively they join activities in the cooperative and the relationships they build in it.

For instance, Sevim is one of the active members of the cooperative. She is more than sixty-five years old, she is retired, and her children left home. She and her husband live together. They are both social democrats and have open-minded personalities. Her husband helps her with domestic work, freeing her from these social reproductive responsibilities. She participates in all production days, social events and meetings, administrative meetings, and any other cooperative-related occasions. Before participating in the cooperative, she had a small handicraft shop. She brings her stuff left from the shop to the cooperative, and she earns money from them if they are being sold. Sevim, as a financially independent woman, participated in the cooperative to socialize and to help other women be more independent from their male members of their families.

Ayşe, on the other hand, who had been an active participant, turned into a non-participant after she found a regular job. Her motivation to enter the cooperative was quite different to that of Sevim. She is in her early forties, a primary school graduate, and never worked outside the home. Consequently, she

lacks the necessary skills to work. She is a housewife in a traditional family with a low income and living with her family-in-law. When she was younger, her husband and family-in-law did not let her work. Her basic motivation for participating in the cooperative was economic. She always wanted to work to earn her income with her own labor to be more independent in her life choices and provide better opportunities for her children. However, participating in the cooperative was not a decision she could make on her own, but rather one that required the permission of her husband. As she stated:

> When Sister Esin asked me to work with her in the cooperative, I got so excited but also nervous at the same time. Because whenever I said anything to my husband about working, he immediately got angry and rejected. My mother-in-law was not helping me at all in this regard but supported my husband by emphasizing who would do the housework. And, of course, they did not let me work in the cooperative, too.

As a family acquaintance, Esin—the head of the cooperative—began visiting their home frequently and sought approval from her family members to check whether Ayşe could come to the cooperative for a few days to help Esin there. Becoming a members of the cooperative itself was a four-month journey for Ayşe. She epitomizes this journey as follows:

> After my husband and mother-in-law visited the cooperative a couple of times and were convinced that only women work there, they agreed to let me go there more often as long as I do not skip the housework and do not return home late.

Eventually, they succeeded; the members of the cooperative managed to get Ayşe outside the home, and the cooperative became, as she described it, as "a place I found my personality, feel free to express my very own thoughts and feelings and I feel independent here." The Konak Cooperative became a symbol of freedom for her. Although she worked like a bee, she never complained about it and said that the cooperative is where she rests her soul and body. When she started to work, she initially gave all of her earnings to her husband; later, she set aside part of her income for herself and her children. Ultimately, when her husband asked her for money, she reacted like this, in her own words:

> When he asked me for money with his pink cheeks, I felt like my feet were off the ground because I was equal to him, and he was just about to realize it.

Ayşe was always ready to come to the cooperative. Being an active participant meant more than economic income for Ayşe. It was an opportunity for her to feel free, to laugh loud, and to express her own thoughts. And she had the freedom of mobility/movement in the end. Before joining the cooperative, she

was only able to visit the market, close relatives, and nearby neighbors. Later, she would go anywhere by herself. After three years of experience in the cooperative, Ayşe found a job in the textile sector with a full social security contract. Her husband was ready to accept her decision to work in a place where both women and men work together. Without her experience in the women's cooperative, this would not have been possible for her, underlining the transforming power of women's cooperatives.

Candan, who is also an active participant, is in her mid-fifties, raised her two children, and finally has the opportunity to participate in the cooperative. She was born in a village and has only a primary school degree. She has always wanted to receive a higher education. However, her father prevented her from pursuing it since she was the eldest among her siblings and needed to assist her mother at home. Her other siblings were all university graduates. She has been working in the cooperative for three years. Her motivation to participate in the cooperative was economic, not because she needed money to regulate her life, but because she always wanted to be an independent woman with a career. She was lucky to have a good marriage, as she stated:

> My husband is a financial accountant. Thanks to him, we never faced financial difficulties during our marriage, my husband fulfilled every wish of mine and my children. But it was his money in the end, not mine. I have to ask him for money when I need.

She is one of the happiest members of the cooperative. She participates in every event. Even if she earns 200 Turkish liras a day (approximately US$6–7), she becomes the happiest in the cooperative. It is not because she needs that money, but because she earns that money with her own labor. She states that she would have liked to have this opportunity when she was younger, but she had to take care of her two children and husband. Nevertheless, she still has social reproduction duties, but she organizes these in terms of the cooperative's schedule. All of these three narratives underline the importance of active participation to the cooperative and how it can greatly assist women in (re) shaping their lives and livelihoods.

Merve, on the other hand, is an intermittent participant in the Konak cooperative. She is also a handicraft shop owner in Kastamonu. The factor behind her participation in the cooperative is to grow social networks so that she finds opportunities to promote her products. She participates in social events and activities generally, and sells her products through the cooperative. She is already independent economically; she is in her early forties and has a degree from a vocational school of higher education in handicrafts. As she herself explains, she likes to be in such an environment full of working women. And she is always the one having the most fun at social activities. She does especially care about events and meetings held with other institutions since she thinks that it this the way to grow her networks to find better market

opportunities to sell her goods. In these kinds of meetings, she always tries to meet and communicate with the representatives of these institutions to present her own goods. As she states, "we women are stronger when we stand together." Merve, as the busiest woman in the cooperative (since she also has her shop), was still confronting many difficulties regarding her reproductive responsibilities. According to Merve, "I would never have my own shop if my mother would not help me. Despite my mother's support, when my daughter and husband get sick, I do not open my shop and take care of them."

As illustrated in the narratives above, even though women's motivations and factors may vary because of personal preferences and social and familial factors to participate in the cooperative, social reproductive duties and responsibilities stand as the common factor for all that determines women's participation. These reproductive responsibilities not only hinder women from working outside the home and participating in the cooperative at younger ages, but they also put them in a place where working in a cooperative becomes the most appropriate option for them. These duties and responsibility concomitantly affect how and to what extent women attend to the activities of the cooperative, which in turn alters whether and how they would benefit from these cooperatives.

### Women's agency

Increased women's agency has been another major theme of our research. We strongly argue that women participating in the cooperatives benefit from it in very different ways. In particular, they gain the social and psychological skills required leading to the ability to use the agency or the expansion of the use of agency. Moreover, we also strongly maintain that active participants are far ahead of intermittent participants in using their own agency.

The relationships they build in the cooperative considerably help women improve their ability to use their agency. When they encounter a problem in their family, they talk about these problems and advise each other, which helps women having problems find new ways to solve these. They improve alternative ways to solve similar problems. If the problem continues, they try to solve it in another way, until they find a permanent solution.

For instance, one of the Konak Cooperative members was facing some gynecological health issues. Her husband did not want to accompany her to the doctor because he claimed that the hospital would be full of women. She felt embarrassed and somewhat frightened to go to the doctor herself. Another member accompanied her twice, after which she started to go to have the tests by herself. Having her friend alongside her boosted her self-confidence. As a result, she overcame her anxiety of going to the hospital alone. It seems something ordinary from the outside, but we talked about it for weeks in the cooperative. This process ultimately resulted in a major change in her mobility in the public sphere.

Solidarity among the active members is better established when compared to intermittent members. Because active members join each and every activity in the cooperative, they know each other much better, face similar problems, and try to find solutions to these problems collectively. This was not so much the case for intermittent members. Their levels of interpersonal trust toward other members of the cooperative were not as high because they did not have the same solid grasp of problem-solving processes. Furthermore, intermittent members have had a greater tendency to cause conflicts in the cooperative for the same reason. Conflicts could be observed especially when there were large orders, or a large number of guests were hosted in the restaurant. Although they were helpful to some extent, intermittent members caused disruptions in the normal workflow and created conflicts.

Throughout the fieldwork, we observed and experienced how active members' attitudes have changed in favor of their ability to use their own agency. For example, Fatma and Hayriye were quite timid when they joined the cooperative. Fatma and Hayriye live in the neighborhood of the cooperative, which enabled them to think about working outside the home after Esin invited them to help. They are primary school graduates who were born in villages and moved to the city center after they married. They grew up in a traditional conservative family structure and lived lives structured by conservative, religious values and norms. As they stated in their job interview, working outside the home as a woman was out of the question in their family, and being a member of the cooperative did not mean proper work for them. Rather, being a member meant spending some time in the Konak Cooperative with other women doing whatever they did at home and receiving some income in return. Convincing their husbands to let them work in the cooperative took around three months. Before they got their husband's permission, they hid from their husbands that they had joined the cooperative.

In the beginning, they were always silent and shy, and they declared that they did not want to serve male guests in the restaurant. For a long time, the only conversation we had with them was greetings and the day's schedule. In time, by observing the other members and by exchanging experiences, they discovered their own voices and joined the process. They began to engage in conversations by telling stories, making jokes, and sharing their own ideas about production processes or services at the restaurant. They started, at their own volition, to serve male guests in the restaurant. They improved their speaking skills by attempting to change their rural accents. We observe these changes in their lives, but they also speak out about the changes they experience in our chit-chats:

> The best side of earning my own money is to be able to buy the headscarf in my favorite color by myself because my husband had let me buy only black or dark blue. See, colorful headscarves look great on me, especially if I buy them myself without my man's intervention. (Fatma)

> Before I started to come to the cooperative, I was asking my husband about his day in the evenings, and he was telling about what he did at work. And this was the only conversation among us. Now, he is asking about my day, and I am telling him everything we did in the Konak. We are talking now, and you know what, he is listening to me. My sons also listen to me. I wonder if being self-reliant is something like this. (Hayriye)

Fatma and Hayriye have evolved into two very different women from the ones we had first met, and are now much more confident, enthusiastic, and cheerful.

Women working in the cooperative find opportunities to develop their capabilities. During the time they spend in the cooperative, they are not only producing goods to sell to have a revenue, but they also socialize with non-family women. They exchange information about everything practical for their everyday lives and hone their problem-solving abilities in both business and family-related issues. The relationships they built in the cooperative guide them in their everyday lives. Sharing their problems with members does not only help them relax, but it also helps them come up with different ways to negotiate with their families. Moreover, they use empathetic language in the cooperative to prevent conflicts, which also prevails in their daily behaviors and attitudes. Putting themselves into others' shoes makes them realize their own individualities. All in all, especially being an active part of the cooperative enables them to have better communication skills, be aware of what they really want, make sense of what is happening around them, and encourage them to establish their own preferences.

In addition, by contributing their earnings to the family budget, women increase their status in family budgeting. For instance, Elif became able to cook meat for dinner more often than before, which pleased her entire family. She was so proud that one of her children stated in the evening that they eat more meat thanks to her, which considerably boosted her self-confidence.

Similarly, Fatma is one of the members who enjoys her new status in the family. When she participated in the cooperative, she gave all of her earnings to her husband. After a while, her husband suggested that it would be better for her to keep her money for savings if she wanted. One day, her husband asked Fatma, "Hey, boss, do you have any money, we could not make it to the end of this month?" Fatma was so proud of that, and her eyes sparkled when she told us that how her husband addressed her as "boss." After that, Fatma was working even harder than before. Fatma, with her new status of income generator in the family, gained an awareness that she could accomplish more now. Following that, she concentrated on enhancing her own personal abilities and personality, which transformed her from a silent partner to an enthusiastic active member of the cooperative.

Based on the experiences of these women, we can delineate the transformative potential of women's cooperatives in women's agency. Heightened agency

reflects in the form of being able to make one's own choices, being considered and listened to by their family members, being able to contribute to their family budgets, and so on.

## Perception of womanhood

Another important dimension that has appeared in the interaction between our theory and fieldwork is the perception of womanhood. In light of our fieldwork, the perception of womanhood amongst the members of the Konak Cooperative is generated by the social relations of gender. They accepted the roles and duties of a woman in society, which regulated their everyday choices and preferences. Even if they had many arguments and complaints about how hard it is to be a woman because of the burden and the responsibilities, they did not envisage a quantum leap in their lives. That is why they were looking for ways to lighten their burden instead of changing it. In a way, in Kandiyoti's (1988) words, they were simply "bargaining with patriarchy" (for a similar comparative perspective, see also DeTemple 2020).

However, there is a difference in their understanding of being a wife and being a mother. Even though they completely normalize, recognize, and embrace the reproductive responsibilities and duties that are attached to their social and familial roles as women, they are selective in their criticism of the burden they bear. They are frank about criticizing their husbands for being selfish and not helping with domestic chores. On the other hand, they are all okay with the "burden" of motherhood. They are not whining about their responsibilities as mothers, nor are they condemning the duties and responsibilities that motherhood impose on them.

Being a mother or being a wife are some of the main topics discussed among the members in their daily conversations. When Neşe was telling the story of how the meal she made the previous day was very spicy, she was stressing this distinction unintentionally:

> My son came from school and said it was too spicy while eating his food; then I made him an omelet. Later, my husband came home and while having his dinner, started to grumble about the food being spicy. I told him to either eat it or go to bed hungry. If he does not like the food I cook, he will eat what his mother cooks. I am not his chef.

As depicted in the narrative above, Neşe is not complaining about cooking for the family or preparing dinner twice for her son and husband. What annoys her is her husband's reaction to the meal she prepared. According to Neşe, feeding her child is a mother's responsibility. Yet, if her husband does not like the food, it is his mother's responsibility to feed him. Indeed, she fulfilled her responsibility as a wife by cooking for the family.

Being a mother is the main component of their perception of womanhood. Besides, they mainly save their earnings for their children to provide them

with better opportunities than their own. On the other hand, they would be quite critical of their roles of being a wife. According to what Elif said, being a wife did not mean being a slave to a husband; he would at least throw his dirty clothes into the laundry basket. Other members were also complaining about their husbands. However, their demand was not to fully change their condition; they just wanted their husbands to help them in the process.

The members of the Konak Cooperative have always been polite, respectful, and thoughtful toward each other. Since they have known each other for a long time and have been working together more than two years, they have learned to manage their relationships. Throughout the research, no major conflicts or ongoing resentments between the members of the cooperative were observed. Although there were, at times, moments of rift among some members, they were always supportive of each other in many situations. The members managed crises smoothly, and whenever a disagreement arose between two people, there was always someone else to calm them down and offer some solutions. If someone was offended by another, the others immediately tried to reconcile them. The basic logic behind it was that "we are all women here; we have no one but each other."

This spirit of solidarity guided them on every problem they faced in their private lives too. The cooperative members were trying to help their fellow women, and were giving suggestions to each other about familial issues. And all of these suggestions were shaped around their perception of womanhood that stems from relations of gender and power. When a member shared a problem about her husband, all the other members had almost certainly experienced the same thing, and were able to offer solutions to these problems. The solutions are mostly based on the idea of finding new space to breathe in the short term, rather than finding ways to challenge the current patriarchal value system to provide long-term solutions.

### Social reproductive duties and responsibilities

The last theme that developed from the analysis of the data collected through the fieldwork is social reproductive duties and responsibilities. As shown in the previous themes, women are not independent of social relations of gender and power. While these women are the carriers of social reproduction duties and responsibilities in their private and public domains of life, they are expected to work as context-free business owners or entrepreneurs in the cooperatives. As Fraser (2017) points out, the capitalist private/public dichotomy treats economic production and social reproduction as separate dimensions of production belonging to two different domains of life; however, in the case of women's cooperatives, the findings of the research show that these two domains are inextricably intertwined.

The women in the Konak Cooperative were organizing their days according to the schedule of the cooperative. They were either cooking their dinner and doing their laundry early in the morning or before going to bed. If they

received an order that was not in the schedule, they had a hard time adjusting to this new schedule. Such unforeseen changes in the schedule caused women to disrupt the delicate balance they had established between the private and public spheres. Alternatively, if someone gets sick in the family, these women are torn between their responsibilities in the cooperative and at home, and usually had to take care of the latter first.

The members enjoy what they do in the cooperative, they enjoy spending time there with other members, and they enjoy it more when they earn money. The more money they earn, the more they want to partake in the activities of the cooperative. Yet, the way to grow their business and earn more money is through working more at the Konak Cooperative, attending training and education, which the members of the cooperative do not have enough time to devote to due to their reproductive duties. Here, women's invisible labor in the household becomes visible as an impediment to their productive labor. Consequently, as the literature on social reproduction theory underlines, the permeable relationship between public and private domains of women's everyday lives shows how women's inferior position is being reproduced in society even though they are supported to be empowered through women's cooperatives.

It is illuminating to share an anecdote with one of the members of the Konak Cooperative at this point. Pınar is one of the members of the cooperative and is the only one who is not originally from Kastamonu. She is a high school graduate and came to Kastamonu as a bride when she was young. She wears a headscarf, but she does not identify herself as a pious person since she is not performing any religious rituals except fasting and ritual sacrifice. Pınar reads a lot and has feminist consciousness. She is proud of her daughter who is currently studying at university and does not wear a headscarf. In one of our conversations with Pınar, she told me that she always gives bits of advice to her daughter about the importance of being an independent woman.

She continued as follows:

> Do whatever you want my daughter. Do not think you need to marry and have kids immediately after you finish the university. Go abroad, travel the world, and make your own house. After I met you [the researcher], I said to my daughter, you do not even have to be a mother; not every woman has to be a mother, and you can choose to live your own life.

Here, by mentioning this narrative, our aim is to show that the members of the cooperative may not have the means to fully challenge the existing structures that put *them* into their subordinate position in society. But the relationships they built in the cooperative have enhanced their ability to use their own agency, encouraged them to think critically about the world they live in, and to envisage a different life for their kids (especially their daughters). This transformative potential is innate to the process of empowerment, which is not always explicit, but so powerful.

## Discussion

Women's empowerment is a multidimensional concept. As it is conceptualized in this study, women are not and should not be treated as a homogeneous group when discussing their empowerment. Kastamonu, where we have conducted our fieldwork, is an epitome of Turkish societal structure concerning women's condition in a society in which patriarchal norms and values go hand in hand with neoliberalism and neoconservatism.

As our findings show, the members of the Konak Cooperative receive income through their labor that paves the way for their economic empowerment by providing economic status. Thanks to this income, they have higher agency in the family budget as well as in their daily lives such as what they wear, where they go, etc.

The psychological and social gains of the members of the cooperative surpass even their economic empowerment. The relationships women build in the cooperative and the social gains they garner are much more effective and meaningful in empowering them than the economic benefits they reap. In the cooperative, they socialize with people who are not from their family, improve themselves personally, and find a place for themselves in the public domain that was denied to them before. The greater change in members' everyday lives is in their attitudes, self-confidence, and transformation. The relationships they built in the cooperative, the exchange of practical information about their lives, and the exchange of experiences on similar issues faced in daily life have a greater impact on the process of empowerment.

The process of women's empowerment, however, requires more than the ones discussed above. As our research has shown (and also in line with the feminist political economy perspective), when women try to navigate through the hardships they face, they usually "bargain with patriarchy." During the process of empowerment, women should raise awareness about the structural factors that place them in their subordinate condition in society to be fully empowered or emancipated. Thus, the empowering potential of women's cooperatives should be transformed into social action by targeting gendered structures of constraints in order to fully empower women as equal citizens.

## Concluding remarks

Gender equality is a crucial aspect of sustainable development and women's empowerment is a key strategy to achieve it. A woman can only be considered empowered if she can make strategic choices that directly affect her life. This article has aimed to explore the potential and limits of women's empowerment in patriarchal societies. The case at hand, a women's cooperative in Kastamonu, Turkey, tells us a lot about the first-hand experiences of the women who have become members of this cooperative, as well as the researcher who partook in the activities of this cooperative.

The case at hand offers novel and comparative insights into women's struggle for gender equality in patriarchal societies. The article has underlined the existing challenges against women due to their social reproduction duties. Nevertheless, as our article shows, women's cooperatives stand as a valuable socioeconomic entity, which could enhance the lives of many underprivileged women throughout the world and enable their participants to reinvent their identity as women. Our study has illustrated how members of women's cooperatives, especially active members, exhibit noticeable changes in their daily lives and attain a stronger sense of economic, psychological, social, and organizational empowerment.

Future research could further broaden our horizons about the study of women's empowerment via women's cooperatives in other research settings in Turkey, as well as in comparative cases in the Global South. All in all, women's empowerment stands as a core tenet of gender politics throughout the world. To this end, women's cooperatives could be a major vehicle toward women's empowerment. Despite facing obstacles from social reproduction "duties," patriarchal societal conditions and political institutions, women continue their efforts to achieve empowerment and create a more equal society. While progress may be piecemeal in the short term, it will hopefully lead to significant strides toward a more egalitarian society in the future.

## Notes

1. An earlier version of this research has been published as a PhD dissertation at Middle East Technical University, Ankara, Turkey, titled "Women's Empowerment: An Ethnographic Account" by one of the coauthors of the research (Asik-Akdemir 2023) and supervised by the other coauthor (Kursat Cinar). The theoretical framework and the empirical analyses have been considerably developed and enhanced in the current version.
2. Kastamonu is a middle-size province in the Western Black Sea Region in Turkey with a population of around 390,000. According to the most recent statistics by the Turkish Statistical Institute (TÜİK), Kastamonu ranks 47th among 81 cities in Turkey with regard to socioeconomic development. Politically, Kastamonu is a competitive, battleground city. While Kastamonu voted predominantly for the ruling AKP's Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in the most recent 2023 presidential election (with 65 percent of the votes), it elected a candidate from the main opposition party—the Republican People's Party (CHP)—as its mayor in the most recent 2024 local election (with 49 percent of the votes).
3. Active participation refers to the members of the cooperative who are participating in all activities, including production, social events, and meetings. Intermittent/passive participation refers to the members who are participating in activities depending on their own schedule in a selective manner, predominantly due to their domestic duties at home and their

personal commitments. While some participate only in the production, others participate in social events and activities. Ten members are active, and twelve of them are passive participants, all of whom we have interacted with. Non-participation, on the other hand, is the third type of participation. While these members participated in the cooperative legally, they neither participated in production; nor social events and meetings. Thirty-one of the members are non-participants in the Konak Cooperative.

## Supplementary material

Supplementary material is available at *Social Politics* online.

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## Data availability

The data underlying this article are available in the article and in its online supplementary material.

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Social Politics, 2025, 00, 1–23