

WOMEN COOPERATIVES

FOR SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT



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MN**
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WOMEN MEDIATORS
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RESEARCH ON WOMEN COOPERATIVES 2023

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The Turkey Antenna of the Mediterranean Women Mediators Network is an initiative, which aims to strengthen the role of women in the processes of mediation, negotiation and peace building and to utilize these mechanisms in creating a public discourse in this respect. The membership of the Turkey Antenna comprises women from Turkey with a wide range of affiliations, including members of civil society, academia, mediation and politics and have professional expertise in gender issues, conflict resolution and peace building. The Turkey Antenna, which is created under the international umbrella of the is not organically linked to any political entity or civil society organization.

The mission of the Turkey Antenna is to enable women mediators in Turkey to meaningfully participate in all phases of peace and conflict resolution processes in order to achieve gender sensitive conflict resolution and peace building outcomes. In this respect, the Turkey Antenna aims to undertake relevant research and disseminate its findings, organize seminars and training sessions to enhance women's mediation capabilities and skills, and develop applied conflict resolution activities, including to foster partnerships and cooperation with other mediation and peace building networks nationally and globally.

In accordance with United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security, women's role in mediation and peace building are well recognized and acknowledged by member states and international institutions. However, in Turkey, women's peace initiatives are not sufficiently visible, yet, as emphasized by 1325, women can make significant contributions to gender equality and sustainable peace.

The Mediterranean Women Mediators Network (MWMN) is an initiative promoted by the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation in collaboration with Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI) and Women in International Security (WIIS) Italy, to foster women's role and participation in mediation, peacemaking and peacebuilding efforts, particularly in the Mediterranean region. The MWMN was launched in Rome on October 26, 2017 and gathers today a multigenerational group of more than 60 women mediators from 20 countries and, under the coordination of the MWMN Secretariat, it conducts numerous activities ranging from trainings, peer to peer exchanges, advocacy and outreach campaigns, as well as local activities through its Antenna, such as the Turkey Antenna.

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January 2023



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

What does the research tell us?

Based on the interviews and observations made as part of the Women's Cooperatives Research, it is safe to say that women's cooperatives are structures that provide goods and services to the community, generate a small income for their members, and play a role in preventing women's poverty through the "more work, more profit" formula. The main motivation behind the establishment of women's cooperatives is to turn the labor of women who produce at home with their own limited means into financial gain. The research reveals that the women's cooperatives interviewed were mostly established by women without any capital, in an effort to create jobs for themselves.

Women's cooperatives give women economic freedom, strengthen solidarity among women and contribute to gender equality.

Women's cooperatives not only provide economic freedom and employment for women, but also function as social networks and spaces for solidarity. The experience of cooperation and solidarity bring to women's lives economic freedom, allow them to leave home and develop their individual identities, increase their sense of unity and solidarity, improve their digital literacy skills, help them create environments of cultural transmission and a culture of collective thinking, and as such they visibly support women's empowerment. The cooperatives also have "inspirational" outcomes for other women in the city, such as encouraging them to open their own shops and venture into business, even if they do not join the cooperative themselves.

At the same time, it is also observed that the space of economic freedom that cooperatives open up for women has turned into a form of "buying their freedom". Men who were initially opposed to cooperative activities tend to withdraw their opposition and become supportive

as they see the significant amounts of money women are earning. Women's cooperatives contribute positively to women and the "perception of women" in the regions where they are located in many areas related to achieving gender equality. For example, cooperatives offer housewives the opportunity for individualization by enabling them to leave the house, to decide when to enter and leave the house, and to separate time for work from time for household chores on their own initiative. It makes significant contributions to issues such as inclusion in the public sphere and feeling equal to men, freedom from economic violence, gaining awareness of and recognizing violence, sharing tasks in domestic work, trainings and awareness-raising activities, freedom from patriarchy, self-governance, local women's participation and combating misogyny. Women also report that they have gained more respect both within the family and in the community after cooperative work.

The friendship networks formed among women also empower different vulnerable groups.

The most striking aspect of cooperative organizations is that, in addition to providing economic support, they also help build and strengthen bonds of friendship among women. For example, cooperatives have functions such as raising awareness of cooperative members who have been subjected to violence, teaching them their legal rights and seeking their legal rights together when necessary, and supporting and rescuing women who succumb to domestic violence out of fear of their husbands or others. There is another "invisible" but very important function of women's cooperatives, which is the inclusion of disadvantaged groups. Underlining this function, some cooperative members say that they include disabled people under the cooperative umbrella,

or that they take in women who are too old and want to be included in the system, giving them all an opportunity in profitable work. In this sense, the relationships that started under the umbrella of women's cooperatives are also seen to embrace the city's migrants.

There is a need for more sustainable relations between local governments and women's cooperatives through legal regulations.

Interviews revealed that women's cooperatives across the country are divided into "cooperatives established with the support of municipalities or governorships" and "independent cooperatives." This distinction plays a decisive role in cooperatives' relations with local governments. On the other hand, local governments or local authorities manually establishing cooperatives in order to receive state grants or to increase the women's employment rate on paper clearly increases their quantity but weakens their quality and prevents them from being sustainable.

Municipalities' support for women's cooperatives varies as municipal administrations change. The most striking examples of this situation are the women's cooperatives in Southern and Eastern Anatolia, which are governed by trustees. There are examples of appointed trustees cutting off communication with institutions where the elected mayor worked, supporting new organizations, and some institutions facing market shortages because of this. Among the demands of women's cooperatives are that municipalities be banned from partnering with cooperatives and that every municipality be required by law to publicly support all cooperatives without discriminating against any cooperative.

The biggest supporters of women's cooperatives are women's cooperatives themselves.

Interviews conducted as part of the research re-

vealed that the biggest supporters of women's cooperatives are women's cooperatives themselves. Cooperatives support each other by sharing information during the establishment phase, sharing experiences and guidance on issues such as legislation and procedures, exchanging products with each other, and referring customers to other women's cooperatives for products they do not have. In some cities or districts, communication between cooperatives is quite advanced and a network of solidarity has been established through what can be called an "invisible pact".

In the interviews two organizations stood out among the civil society organizations that women's cooperatives received support from: Foundation for the Utilization of Women's Labor (KEDV-Kadın Emeğini Değerlendirme Vakfı) and SİMURG, which it founded. Interviews conducted as part of the research revealed that cooperatives have received programs from these two civil society organizations, including training support, virtual and real market support for product sales, capacity building training, and leadership training.

Problems in the field

Women's cooperatives face many problems and challenges, large and small, but the three most prominent ones are the following: Lack of funding/financial support, uncertainty about legislation and procedures, and political interference in cooperatives. Women's cooperatives play an important role in women's empowerment and visibility in the public sphere, and with a little legal regulation and financial support, they can have a much greater positive impact on women's lives in Turkey and become more respected and influential.

On the other hand, another dilemma for women's cooperatives is the danger of being confined to "women-only" business areas. While there are dozens of cooperatives operating in areas such as home cooking, handicrafts, baklava and pastry making, there are no professional cooperatives such as the architect women's cooperative or the pharmacist women's cooperative.

CHAPTER

1

INTRODUCTION:
PURPOSE OF THE RESEARCH

SCOPE and METHOD OF THE RESEARCH

WHAT IS A COOPERATIVE and
WHAT DOES IT DO?

INTRODUCTION

Purpose of the research

The “Women’s Cooperatives Research” was conducted by the Turkey Antenna of the Mediterranean Women Mediators Network Group with the support of the Mediterranean Women Mediators Network¹ in 2022. Turkey Antenna of the Mediterranean Women Mediators Network Group² is a community that has come together to strengthen the role of women in mediation, negotiation and peace-building processes and to ensure the implementation of these mechanisms. The aim of the group is to conduct research on gender-sensitive conflict resolution, negotiation and mediation and to share the results of this research with the public; to provide trainings and develop practical studies to increase women’s competencies in these areas. Through these means, the group aims to ensure women’s effective participation in conflict resolution, mediation and peace processes. The participants of the network are members of civil society, academics, mediators and politicians working on gender, conflict resolution and peace-building in Turkey.

The Women’s Cooperatives Research was designed as the first step of a project carried out by the Mediterranean Turkey Antenna of the Mediterranean Women Mediators Network Group with the aim of organizing mediation and negotiation trainings for representatives of women’s cooperatives in different regions of Turkey, bringing them together with women in regions they do not have contact with, and contributing to social peace processes and dialogue. The research was conducted to examine the current situation of women’s cooperatives and the problems they face in the field, to examine their communication, relations and dialogue with public institutions and other stakeholders, and to understand the impact of women’s coopera-

1. <https://womenmediators.net/>
2. <https://kadinarabulucular.net/>

tives on women. To this end, the research examines the current situation, focusing on women’s cooperatives’ relations with local governments, the public sector and civil society, and the contribution of cooperative work to women’s empowerment, solidarity, gender equality and social peace.

Scope and method of the research

The report on the Women’s Cooperatives Research consists of an analysis of the outputs obtained through qualitative methods and the findings based on them. The report includes the findings of field research and archival research, including the outputs of in-depth interviews and focus group meetings conducted between March and May 2022.

As part of the research, 6 network members from different disciplines reached 37 women’s cooperatives in 14 provinces in 7 regions and conducted interviews with 70 members at different levels. In addition to structured questions about how women’s cooperatives were established, the contributions of cooperatives to women, the problems experienced in their operation and how these problems were solved, the perspective of women’s cooperatives on issues in Turkey, and their relations with local government, central government, civil society and other cooperatives, additional questions were asked based on women’s experiences and local dynamics. In addition, participatory observation of the cooperative’s work was also conducted.

The cooperatives and their members were selected on the basis of demographic characteristics such as age, political views, lifestyle, education level, marital status, etc. to ensure that the sample was economically and class diversified.

What is a cooperative and what does it do?

The word cooperative originates from the Latin word cooperatio, which means “cooperation”. Cooperatives are structures composed of members and established to meet the economic, cultural and social needs of their members. According to the definition of the International Cooperative Alliance (ICA), “a cooperative is an autonomous association of persons united voluntarily to meet their common economic, social and cultural needs and aspirations through a jointly-owned and democratically-controlled enterprise.”³ Cooperatives, which have been recognized around the world for 179 years, today directly or indirectly employ 250 million people and have more than 1 billion members.⁴ In Turkey, cooperatives have been in existence for more than 150 years.⁵

Historically speaking, cooperative behavior, the tendency to work together and form alliances, is as old as the history of humankind. Humanity has been a cooperative in one form or another ever since it discovered how to act together to overcome the challenges nature threw at it and to benefit economically. But the first cooperative movement in the modern, institutionalized sense was started by 28 weavers in England in 1844.⁶ In France, on the other hand, a carpenters’ cooperative was established in 1831 and a consumer cooperative in 1835. In Germany, an artisan raw material purchasing cooperative was established in 1849 and an artisan credit cooperative in 1850.⁷

3. <https://bit.ly/2AOAsz6> “A cooperative is an autonomous association of persons united voluntarily to meet their common economic, social and cultural needs and aspirations through a jointly-owned and democratically-controlled enterprise.”

4. <https://bit.ly/3XkALJZ>

5. <https://bit.ly/3QpBrLA>

6. <https://bit.ly/3XkALJZ>

7. <https://bit.ly/3ZkpyL3>

When cooperatives were established, the aim was to transform the labor of people working together into profit and to establish a fair working order by dividing the profit equally. Today, this formula still seems to work. In 2008, according to the ICA, the 300 largest cooperatives in the world had a combined turnover of 1.6 trillion dollars. This grandiose number was equivalent to the gross domestic product of the world’s 9th largest economy.⁸

One of the most important characteristics of cooperatives is that they are open to anyone who wants to benefit from them, without any social, political, racial or religious discrimination among their members. The cooperative structure, which is open to anyone who agrees to fulfill the organization’s responsibilities, also offers the possibility to leave freely.

Cooperatives are based on the principle of voluntary and open membership. So what do cooperatives do? In a nutshell, a cooperative provides goods and services, creates employment opportunities and recycles idle resources.



8. <https://bit.ly/3WYvqYK>



What qualities should a cooperative possess?

Cooperatives are based on a unique model that fosters social development and serves as a basis for commercial enterprises. It can be formulated as a kind of “way out of poverty.” In order for an organization to be considered a cooperative, it must meet 3 important criteria:

1) They are owned only by their members. A cooperative serves its members and is managed collectively by its members.

2) It must be self-sufficient. It takes responsibility for itself, provides its own resources and distributes its earnings according to the principles of democracy and justice.

3) There are seven principles of cooperatives recognized by the International Cooperative Alliance. Every cooperative needs to comply with these seven principles. The definition lists self-help, self-responsibility, democracy, equality, justice, honesty and solidarity as the core values of cooperatives.

International cooperative principles (7 Principles)*

1. Voluntary and open partnership

Cooperatives are voluntary organizations open to all who can benefit from their services and are willing to accept the responsibilities of membership, regardless of race, language, religion, gender or political opinion.

2. Democratic oversight by partners

Cooperatives are democratic organizations controlled by members who participate in policy and decision-making processes. Those who serve as elected representatives are accountable to the partners. In unit cooperative organizations, members have equal voting rights. In other levels of cooperative organizations, voting rights are regulated democratically.

3. Economic participation of members

Members contribute fairly to the capital of their cooperative and manage it democratically. At least part of this capital is usually common property of the cooperative. In most cases, partners receive a limited amount of income on the capital (if any), as pledged as a condition of membership. Members allocate their surplus income for one or all of the following purposes: to develop their cooperative, possibly through the creation of “at least some unallocable resources”; to provide profits to members in proportion to their transactions with the cooperative; and to support other activities approved by the members.

4. Autonomy and independence

Cooperatives are autonomous, self-sufficient and member-managed organizations. When cooperatives enter into agreements with other organizations, including governments, or increase their capital through external sources, they do so in a way that maintains the cooperatives’ autonomy and protects the democratic governance of their members.

5. Education, training and information

Cooperatives provide education and training to their members, elected representatives, managers and employees so that they can effectively contribute to the development of their cooperatives. Cooperatives inform the general public - especially young people and members of the general public - about the form and benefits of cooperation.

6. Cooperation among cooperatives

By working together with local, national, regional and international organizations, cooperatives serve their members more effectively and strengthen the cooperative movement.

7. Being responsible to society

Cooperatives work for the sustainable development of their communities through policies approved by their members.

* <https://bit.ly/3vU1YqU>

CHAPTER

2

WOMEN'S COOPERATIVES
& THEIR IMPACT ON WOMEN

MOTIVATION FOR THE ESTABLISHMENT
OF WOMEN'S COOPERATIVES

THE IMPACT OF COOPERATIVES
ON WOMEN'S DEVELOPMENT

Women's cooperatives & their impact on women

Before discussing women's cooperatives, a look at women's employment in Turkey reveals a bleak picture. According to the Turkish Statistical Institute (TurkStat), women's labor force participation rate was only 31.5% in 2015.⁹ This rate is too low compared to upper-middle-income countries such as BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa), OECD and European Union (EU) members (Boudet et al. 2014). Considering that the average labor force participation rate of women in the EU is 51.3% (Eurostat, 2015), the picture becomes clearer.

"Women's Cooperative", one of the most effective models for increasing women's employment, does not have a clear definition accepted worldwide. They can be defined as cooperatives established by women, run by women and engaged in income-generating activities for women's employment. Women's cooperatives, established to alleviate women's poverty and utilize women's labor, are a relatively new model both in Turkey and around the world. Women's cooperatives are organizations that transcend the boundary between purely economic and purely social institutional structures. Here, the generally accepted definition of a cooperative is "an autonomous association of persons voluntarily joined together to meet their common economic, social and cultural needs and aspirations through a jointly owned and democratically controlled enterprise" (ICA, 2015).

The definition of a women's cooperative by the Union of Women's Cooperatives in Turkey (SIMURG) is as follows: "structures created by local women's groups to develop services based on needs and priorities."¹⁰ The members of women's cooperatives are only women.

There are 85 thousand cooperatives in Turkey

with over 8 million members.¹¹ The number of women's cooperatives is 702 and the number of members is around 12 thousand.¹²

The first women's cooperative in Turkey was established in 1999.¹³ Women's cooperative models began to appear in the early 2000s. Women's cooperatives began to be established in line with the demands of women entrepreneurs and grassroots organizations in order to increase women's participation in the workforce, develop social and cultural activities for women, protect and support women, and ensure that they live in a healthy environment. It is now possible to talk about a women's cooperative sector in Turkey. It is safe to say that women's cooperatives are structures that provide goods and services to the community, generate a small income for their members, and play a role in preventing women's poverty through the "more work, more profit" formula. Women's cooperatives have proven to be a sustainable, viable and effective form of organization for economic and social development, and have supported local women, especially those far from employment opportunities, both socially and economically by making them business owners. Today, the women's cooperative sector provides products and services to members and communities across the country, but faces challenges to their effectiveness and growth.

Contrary to popular belief, cooperatives are profit-driven. They are not non-governmental organizations; the purpose of a cooperative is primarily to turn the labor of its members into sales and profit. Each member shares equally in the success of the cooperative, which means that each member works for success with the same commitment and sense of belonging. At least this is the definition, in theory. In practice, however, it

9. <https://bit.ly/3Cvfe99>

10. <https://bit.ly/3XftkDz>

11. <https://bit.ly/3ZzVLyn>

12. <https://bit.ly/3ZzVLyn>

13. <https://bit.ly/3XftkDz>



is undeniable that women's cooperatives also function as non-governmental organizations all over Turkey. In addition to socializing women, enabling them to leave the house on a legitimate basis, and establishing relationships that enable them to complain about domestic violence, in some specific cases cooperatives also take civil initiative on their own and raise social awareness. The success of the Yaşam Kadın Çevre Kültür ve İşletme Kooperatifi (YAKA-KOOP) in Van

in launching a project to combat the problem of child, early and forced marriage, which is widespread in the region, is a case in point. Within the scope of the project, the cooperative founders traveled to villages and districts to raise public awareness, and had wedding industry businesses such as music bands, bridal dressmakers and hairdressers post signs such as "We do not comb bridal hair under the age of 18"

Motivation for the establishment of women's cooperatives

Women's cooperatives are established primarily to enable women, one of the most disadvantaged groups in society, to break free from their subordinate roles in a male-dominated society and find employment. It aims to provide employment opportunities to women who are excluded from the employment network throughout the country by undertaking functions such as opening up jobs for women, transforming regionally produced foods into production items, marketing locally marked products of the regions, opening handicrafts produced at home to the market, and bringing organic foods to consumers.

The stories of the establishment of cooperatives are different. Although they have evolved into similar mechanisms after their establishment, the reasons for their establishment vary according to the circumstances of the individuals, the cities they live in, the products they produce and their perspectives on becoming a commercial enterprise:

- Interviews revealed that one of the cooperatives was first established as an "e-commerce" site, and then the issue of cooperatives was brought up
- Another cooperative said that they

started trading by supplying products to one of the big chain markets and then became a cooperative.

- Some are said to have been established at the instigation of private companies that want to support women in the village or township and at the same time fulfill their own social responsibility mission.
- A few cooperatives were established with the encouragement and support of governorships or municipalities which saw the products of women in the village or district.
- There are also examples of women's cooperatives established by women who met in Public Education courses and came together to form a cooperative.
- There is also the example of a group that consciously set out to become a cooperative while producing soap to sell as souvenirs.

The main starting point for the establishment of women's cooperatives seems to be "utilizing surplus production". In all seven regions of Turkey, women make "handicrafts" at home from agricultural products grown in their

region or other handmade products specific to that region. Food products such as homemade pasta, desserts, tomato paste, jam, ravioli, pomegranate syrup, and traditional arts such as jewelry, ornaments, cheesecloth, veils, needlepoint, and lace are the main products produced by women's cooperatives. In Turkey, handmade products, which are both a cultural habit and a leisure activity, are in demand by those with limited access to these products. It can be argued that the main motivation behind the establishment of women's cooperatives is to make use of the labor of women who produce at home with their own limited means to turn their labor into financial gain. In the stories of cooperatives' founding, it is often the case that there were individuals

and institutions that saw the potential mentioned above and brought women together, encouraged them and led them to institutionalize this potential. One interviewee said that women in their area had been actively producing at home for a long time, but that one of them encouraged others to take their production to the market. Another described women's cooperatives as "a very valuable grassroots movement". "None of us were rich women, but we knew what we wanted; we set out on this journey with zero capital, relying on our labor and strength," she said. Most of the women's cooperatives interviewed were established without any capital support, and were founded by women in an effort to create jobs for themselves.

The impact of cooperatives on women's development

As mentioned earlier, women's cooperatives not only provide economic freedom and employment for women, but also function as social networks and spaces of solidarity. The contributions of the cooperative experience and solidarity to women's lives can be summarized under the following headings: *Employment, Economic Freedom and Professional Development, Leaving Home and Individualization, Sense of Togetherness and Solidarity, Digital Literacy, Cultural Transfer and Culture of Collective Thinking.*

Employment, economic freedom and professional development

Before joining the cooperative, women who produce at home on their own and sell their products through social networks such as relatives and neighbors, often earn less money than their products are worth and at irregular intervals. Cooperatives are institutionalized in such a way that the products produced turn into a regular income, which allows women to become "regular wage earners". The founders and members of the cooperative position themselves as sup-

porting Turkey in reducing its employment problem. "When we establish a cooperative here, we provide some support to solve problems such as poverty and employment," says a cooperative member.

Some of the women interviewed complained that there is no space for women in the labor market. Pointing out that it is common for women who apply to an institution for work to be rejected



simply because they are women, she reminds us that women are often hindered by “marital status” and she lists the excuses offered by prospective employers as follows: *“The possibility of a single woman getting married and quitting her job, the possibility of a married woman having a child and disrupting her work, topics such as maternity leave, and the fact that women are not brought to managerial positions or even hired.”*

On the other hand, cooperatives also provide income to women who are not members of the cooperative but who do piecework outside the cooperative and are called “beneficiaries.” For example, the women’s cooperative in Nallıhan has 19 members, but 250 beneficiaries who do outsourced work for the cooperative.

Some cooperatives employ women who come from other cities or regions for seasonal jobs, which allows them to earn additional income. In addition, it is also reported that in a cooperative which requires products to be entirely handmade as a condition for joining the cooperative, products containing ready-made materials are not accepted.

The role of cooperatives in women’s economic emancipation is illustrated by a wide range of examples and statements in the interviews.

“I can spend from my own budget when I need to for my children”, “When my husband and I go somewhere, I can cover the travel expenses”, “I sent holiday allowance to my children from my own account, I felt stronger”, “My communication with my husband at home has strengthened.”

As statements such as these indicate, it can be said that women have discovered their potential and gained self-confidence.

A participant from Diyarbakır stated that they wanted to get the support of an accountant during

the establishment of the cooperative, but due to the lack of economic conditions, they were unable to do so, so they learned to do the work of the financial advisor themselves. Another said that she was impressed by the examples of cooperative organizations she had seen on a trip to Morocco, and underlined her belief that cooperatives represent a development opportunity for Turkey.

Cooperatives not only create employment opportunities but also contribute to agricultural development. An example from Ankara, describing themselves as “we are peasants, we have no capital, whatever the land gives us, is our capital”, points to the contribution of cooperatives to the cultivation of the land. One interviewee in Antalya said, “We are in favor of production. We produce pasta and noodles. We don’t ask for donations from anyone, we ask them buy our products. All we wish is to work and produce.” A founder of a cooperative in Artvin said that they were established to support women in the city who knit handicrafts such as washcloths and scarves in their efforts to earn money, and described the path they paved for women as “teaching them how to catch fish”.

A founder from Diyarbakır, on the other hand, after mentioning that they work with an extraordinary tempo despite having little financial gain, expresses the motivation for this work as “opening employment opportunities for young people and children who will come after them”. The same person said that after the cooperative was established, there were so many requests for participation that they limited the number of members to the specific neighborhood, as it would have been impossible to meet so many requests.

On the other hand, she also believed that the economic freedom that cooperatives open up for women has turned into a form of “buying their freedom”. Different interviewees also reported that men who initially opposed cooperative activities withdrew their opposition and became more supportive when they saw the significant amounts of money women were earning.

Leaving home and individualization

The majority of cooperative members are retired women and women who have never practiced any profession and identify themselves as “housewives”. The majority of the members of the cooperative are housewives who have spent a significant part of their lives in the home, often under pressure from their spouses and society, taking on the entire domestic workload and receiving no pay or compensation. Cooperatives offer housewives the opportunity for individualization by enabling them to leave the house, to decide when to enter and leave the house, and to separate time for work from time for household chores on their own initiative.

It is also frequently emphasized that housewives living in the suburbs are not free to use their time for themselves compared to working women living in the city center, and that they have to devote their days to their children and husbands from 15.00 onwards, making it impossible for them to socialize in the evenings. This situation is described by participant observers as “the isolation of women”.

Through cooperatives, leaving the home can be “legitimized” for women. The women interviewed in Hakkari said that when they first started the cooperative, they were criticized by those around them, with comments such as “what are these women doing, how can they go to Antalya alone, they should not leave their children behind”. It is reported that people in the neighborhood have even called the husbands of women working in the cooperative to make such criticisms. Yet, interestingly, in the case of Hakkari, some of the women who receive the greatest support from their husbands seem to have gained their own legitimacy. An interviewee in Antalya said that she felt that she had developed socially, that she preferred

to work rather than sit idle at home, and that even her children were proud of her after her development. The metaphor of “the pearl in the oyster” used by an interviewee in Izmir and women’s statements that their previously unrecognized potential was realized after they left home and that they met their “useful” selves are among the examples that illustrate this situation. Another interviewee, who said that she had not had a formal working life before, noted that even her communication with people has become different and that her speaking style has changed.

“Our friends who used to avoid even making eye contact with people have become able to give interviews to newspapers and appear live on television.”

Izmir, Food Engineer, 52 years old

A participant from Antalya explained that even old friends and relatives she met at weddings and funerals in Ankara, where she went to visit her family, had changed their attitudes towards her and respected her more than before. In Izmir, an interviewee described the benefits that members of the cooperative have gained. For example a member who had recently moved to Izmir and started the cooperative said “I now have a phone book. I have friends to drink coffee with” and explained how the relationships that started in the cooperative resulted in solidarity and socialization. Similarly in one of the interviews in Izmir, the interviewees drew attention to the “equalizing” aspect of the cooperative and reminded us of the inclusiveness of the cooperatives: “There are primary school graduates, university graduates and academics



Sense of togetherness and solidarity

“Woman is the home of woman. We proceed on this motto.” (Izmir, accountant, 44 years old). Considering these words of an interviewee, it is clear that the most striking aspect of cooperative organizations is that, in addition to providing economic support, they also enable the formation and strengthening of bonds of friendship among women.

In the interviews, many participants said that they saw cooperatives as places where they could talk about their problems and issues, relax, and act as therapeutic centers. In this way, they say, they solve the problems they face in their daily lives, whether they are related to their homes, their children or other issues, before they escalate. On the other hand, cooperatives also help to strengthen the sense of unity and solidarity among women, and to overcome more major problems in women’s lives through solidarity. For example, cooperatives have functions such as raising awareness of cooperative members who are victims of violence, teaching them about their legal rights and seeking their legal rights together when necessary, and supporting and rescuing women who succumb to domestic violence out of fear of their husbands or others. One of the noteworthy points in this context is that women can meet on the common denominator of being women, regardless of differences in political attitudes or socio-economic status.

“We saw how women with completely different lives support each other, that is, how women who maybe think differently politically support each other. We saw that a serious transformation is possible.”

Ankara, Civil Society Worker, 28 years old

“Women need to have credibility in the public sphere. As soon as women

become visible in the public sphere, men retreat more.”

Izmir, Food Engineer, 52 years old

Women’s cooperatives also serve as “future-oriented” investments, in other words, as “sustainable centers of goodness”. Some cooperative members see the organizations they have established as a legacy that will continue even after their deaths and be passed on to the next generation of the district/city. In this sense, they are making some investments and initiatives for children, preparing them for future involvement in the cooperative. A women’s cooperative in Beypazarı says it plans to contribute to the secondary and high school education of children from primary school onwards, and to include successful children in the system in the future. Another cooperative in Diyarbakır notes that women who are involved in the cooperative take initiatives for the education of their children and send them to school. The founding member also says that his own children volunteer to help with the cooperative’s work, and that they also send the children of cooperative members to beekeeping courses so that they can receive training.

There is another “invisible” but very important function of women’s cooperatives, and that is their inclusion of disadvantaged groups. Underlining this function, some cooperative members say that they include disabled people under the cooperative umbrella, or that they take in women who are too old and yet want to be included in the system, giving them all an opportunity to work. In Diyarbakır, a cooperative employs people with disabilities to create different working spaces for them, and employs people with disabilities who are unable to take part in the production of main products such as baklava and pastry in jobs such as product packaging and office cleaning. This is a striking example of how cooperatives empower women both



economically and socially. Another cooperative founder from Diyarbakır explained the purpose of their establishment and their motivation for continuing their work as eliminating inequalities and enabling women who do not have the connections, power or means to play a role in the field. Another example from Artvin notes that they engage in “social engineering”, protect widows and sick women, and act as organized intermediaries when it comes to helping orphans or poor children.

For some women, women’s cooperatives have become a form of social solidarity. Using keywords such as “touching people”, “making people happy” and “light of love”, some members say that there is more to being part of a cooperative than just commercial goals. They say they have emotional sources of motivation, like helping other women in need and paying their debt to their country and homeland. In addition, women’s cooperatives have also become role models for individual women in their cities to engage in commercial ventures. There are ex-

amples of women who are able to produce and have opened shops and entered business life even if they are not members of a cooperative.

An interviewee stated that cooperatives are places where women learn about their democratic rights, and that they take care to hold democratic elections in their general assemblies, using the “*open list, open envelope, closed ballot*” method.

An important feature of cooperatives is that they include **women from different walks of life**. One of the women interviewed summarizes this situation as follows:

“There are AKP supporters, MHP supporters, CHP supporters, HDP supporters. We bring them together in the markets.”

Ankara, Civil Society Volunteer, 28 years old

Digital Literacy

It is observed that after the cooperative started its activities, digital literacy of cooperative members has visibly increased and they have started to use digital channels effectively. Among the digital opportunities that participants have started to use in the new period are online sales, use of internet and mobile banking, online cargo tracking, use of social media and financial literacy.

Online sales

One of the cooperatives interviewed stated that they started the cooperative primarily as an e-commerce site, and that women who produce at home started by setting up a website to sell their products. There are other similar exam-

ples. On the other hand, there are also members who learned how to sell online only after joining the cooperative. The interviewees who stated that they sell on Instagram said that they mostly use Instagram and Trendyol.

Internet banking and mobile banking

Some of the women said that their lives have changed since joining the cooperative, citing “the ability to do many transactions quickly online” as an example of these changes. The biggest example of this is internet banking. The time saved by not having to go to the bank for money transfers, waiting in line, and going to ATMs, allows members to focus more easily on other activities.



Cargo tracking

The products of most of the women's cooperatives are handicrafts such as soaps or quilts, or homemade food such as tarhana, noodles, and dried baklava. Such products are shipped to different cities. Therefore, one of the benefits of digital literacy is that members can track their cargo online and easily provide information to their customers.

Social media use

One of the biggest impacts of digital literacy on women's cooperatives is the effective use of social media. Through Facebook, they can promote their cooperatives and the products they produce, and through Instagram, they can both

promote and sell their products. A participant from Izmir noted that in addition to all these gains, they also learned how to hold meetings on Zoom during the pandemic, which improved their operation. Participants also noted that they use these channels to get to know other cooperatives, meet others, and communicate and exchange information before meeting face to face.

Financial literacy

One interviewee in Diyarbakır said that after learning how to use computers, they learned financial accounting skills such as capacity reports and cost analysis. This saved them from having to allocate a separate budget for financial accounting work.

Cultural transmission

Women's cooperatives also serve as schools where cultural traditions are kept alive and new generations are taught handicrafts and gastronomy. Production areas that require knowledge and skills, such as local pastries, handicrafts and cheese-making, are developing thanks to women's cooperatives, and new masters are being created. For example, an interviewee in Artvin Hopa said that the Laz pastry recipe learned from her grandmother was passed on to new generations thanks to the cooperative. A woman interviewed in Mardin said that she was interested in gastronomy be-

fore the cooperative, that she wanted to continue the ancient recipes of her grandmother and mother, and that she met the cooperative while working on the food culture of Syrian refugees who came to the city and continued her work there.

"There is a Mardin in every home," says another cooperative founder from Mardin, noting that they are constantly sending local products all over Turkey.

Culture of “collective thinking”

Cooperatives bring together people from different socio-economic groups, educated and uneducated, young and old, experienced and inexperienced. This is where the ethos of participatory democracy comes into play. **In cooperatives, everyone is an equal economic stakeholder, everyone has an equal say in decision-making and decisions are made**

with democratic participation. This necessity naturally leads to making decisions together and enabling collective thinking. During the interviews, a participant from Mardin stated that she felt that a woman in Mardin was the same as a woman in Italy, that they were both women, and that she understood the importance of coming together and joining forces.

Success stories

Women’s cooperatives, along with the employment and empowerment of women, are also instrumental in bringing about certain improvements for their families. For example, a member of the cooperative said that she had gotten her daughter, who has a walking disability, treated with the income from the cooperative. Another example is when members of a cooperative solved the residence permit problem of a foreign member who supported the cooperative. Another example is the case of a member who had been coming to the cooperative frequently but had been absent for a long time, and the members of the cooperative suspected that she was being subjected to violence at home, so they monitored and followed up on this issue.

There are also success stories such as creating libraries for children and providing support to village schools and kindergartens by asking for support from the members of the cooperative and their close circles.

There are also examples of solidarity where cooperatives go to women who are not members, who do not want to be, or who want to be but cannot afford to be, and buy their products, sell them through the cooperative and give the proceeds back to the women. When needed for such events, cooperatives

are even reported to take materials necessary for production to the homes of the non-members. This is also considered as an awareness raising and social responsibility activity.



CHAPTER

3

GENDER EQUALITY AND
WOMEN'S COOPERATIVES



Gender Equality and Women's Cooperatives

It is also observed that cooperatives are formed by people who reside in the same region and have “civil society” participation in common. There are cooperatives established by women who are members/volunteers of civil society organizations working in different fields. The main purpose and agenda of this gathering is expressed as seeking “solutions to women’s poverty”. A founding member of the cooperative, a civil society volunteer from Ankara, expresses this need to find solutions in the following words:

“We are going through a period in which women are getting poorer and violence against women is increasing in a very serious way; it is difficult for women to get empowered and leave the house. We are also going through a period in which direct attacks on women’s bodies are in-

creasing, that is, we are actually being targeted by the government. In such a period, it seemed the right thing to establish something that politically targets women’s economic empowerment, and therefore we set out with this infrastructure.”

Ankara, Civil Society Volunteer, 28 years old

Women’s cooperatives have made positive contributions to gender equality. These positive contributions can be categorized under the following headings: inclusion in the public sphere and feeling equal to men, freedom from economic violence, increased awareness and recognition of violence, sharing of tasks in domestic work, trainings and awareness-raising activities, freedom from patriarchy, self-governance, participation of local women, and combating misogyny.

Inclusion in the public sphere and feeling equal to men

Many of the women members of the cooperatives who participated in the interviews stated that they started to interact with male officials such as governors, mayors, district governors, businessmen, mukhtars and shopkeepers in the city where they live, and that they overcame their inhibitions. Women who, before cooperative membership, were stuck in the identity of “housewife”, not consulted for their opinions and not considered for anything other than their labor at home, began to stop feeling “worthless” in their relationships with men after cooperatives, gained status and increased self-confidence.

“We cooperate with municipalities in many things. Naturally, we attend meetings. Sometimes we sit at the same table

with businessmen. So this is a plus for us. We learn how to negotiate. We were novices at first, but then you learn as you go. So many housewives have become accountants.”

Antalya, Agricultural Engineer, 50 years old

Pointing out that this a process, a founding member from another cooperative said, “at first, they belittled us because they thought we couldn’t do it; they advised us to do this and do that. We were already aware of many of our shortcomings. We learned to do the right things through trial and error.” It is safe to say that taking an active role in women’s cooperatives has undeniable contributions to women’s position in social life.

One interviewee in Izmir explained that they chose to establish a women's cooperative instead of an agricultural development cooperative because they wanted to get rid of the fact that men put women in the second place. In male-dominated organizations women are not put in decision-making positions, and even male managers resort to methods such as making their wives, who have nothing to do with the cooperatives, members in order to gain numerical superiority in the cooperatives. An interviewee in

Artvin explained this situation as follows: "Women have no voice in men's assemblies. With this cooperative, we have earned the right to have that say."

It is also said that cooperatives have broken the reflexes of women, especially those from villages who make handmade products, to hide themselves in crowded areas such as bazaars and markets, and to try to be relegated to the background as if they do not make their own products.

Escape from economic violence

One of the biggest causes of gender inequality is that women are subjected to economic violence by men due to the income imbalance between men and women. Women's cooperatives provide women with economic freedom. Thus, women who earn their own income have the privilege of having a say in the household economy and decision-making mechanisms. Women who previously had to ask their husbands for permission to leave the house said that after joining the cooperative, they were able to leave the house whenever they wanted to do their work and were no longer forced to make excuses to leave the house. An even more positive example is that women have gained freedom not only to go to work in their home cities, but also to attend fairs and meetings in other cities. A cooperative representative from Hakkari, for

example, said that her husband did not object when she said, "I have a business meeting and I will go to Van for two days" and that she had never had such an opportunity before. In fact, this situation is the same as it is in Izmir, a city considered to be Westernized in Turkey. Women who were previously subjected to economic violence because they did not have the privilege to spend their own money and were dominated by figures such as husbands, fathers and mothers-in-law who covered their expenses, are freed from this clamp after they start working. A participant from Diyarbakır recounted an incident in which men established a rival cooperative and suggested that they exclusively buy women's cooperative's products and sell them at a profit: "They say, 'Let us live off your back. So we refused,'" she said.

Increased awareness and "recognizing violence"

It is clear that women's cooperatives have taken on the function of being a place where women's domestic violence is exposed. This fact was expressed by different participants, and was also mentioned as a contribution of the cooperatives to women's lives. A cooperative participant in Ankara said that the fact that the women's struggle had shed its previous image of being a "misogynist organization" and was now on a legitimate basis, contributed to this sense of solidarity: "*Women see that the more they come together, the stronger they become.*"

Interviews revealed that some cooperatives offer awareness-raising trainings on violence. The organizers state that when they asked the participants for the first time during these trainings, "Do you experience violence?" they received the answer "No, my spouse does not beat me" and that the participants were not familiar with the terms psychological violence, economic violence, emotional violence and digital violence, and that they learned them thanks to the trainings. During the interviews, a cooperative representative explained this situation as follows:



“When women realize these things, there is a change in the way they raise their children. When a woman earns money, when she is self-confident and able to stand on her own feet, she stands against that violence. She now says no to the violence she has been oppressed by for years.”

Izmir, shopkeeper, 45 years old

Another participant said that when they started the cooperative, they were subjected to criticism, especially on the basis of their identity as mothers, and accusations such as “how can you leave your children and go!” were made by their mothers-in-law, but that these accusations stopped because the members of the cooperative continued to work in the cooperative with resilience for a long time.

Division of tasks in domestic chores

Some of the participants noted that after they started working in the cooperative, their husbands took over some of the household chores at home, and that the unfairness in this regard had begun to be redressed. Some participants talked about the importance of their spouses thinking on their own and doing household chores such as washing dishes and laundry without having to remind them. For women, this means a reduction in the so-called “mental load.” Some said that they also receive support from their husbands in childcare.

On the other hand, when observing the impact

of women’s cooperatives on gender equality, it is important to note that there were differences among the regions where participants lived. In Turkey’s Eastern provinces or in provinces with closed societies, such as Central Anatolia, women’s inclusion in the workforce makes a bigger and more significant difference. On the other hand, a cooperative member from Artvin, one of the Eastern Black Sea provinces where women are already in the city and in life, said, “there are few women here who would stay at home because men tell them not to go. We have not seen any male intervention here.”

Trainings and awareness raising

Some members of the cooperatives also report that they conduct training programs to raise awareness and the level of education of their members and volunteers outside their own areas of work. Within the scope of these programs, trainings are also provided directly on gender equality; the role of women, the role of men, and changing established role perceptions are covered in the trainings. Efforts are being made to eliminate certain codes such as “woman going to the market”, “woman wearing slippers”, or “immoral woman”. They share the view that awareness-raising efforts to give the image of

the “working woman” a stronger and more respected position in the family and society are yielding results, and that cooperative members are role models for other women in the city.

Another cooperative member points to the potential of women’s cooperatives to play a role in social transformation with the following words:

“If women are educated and made conscious, the girls and boys raised by women will also be conscious... As



people coming from Central Asia, we are patriarchal. It will take generations to change our genetic codes. If we start raising awareness now, the next generation, and the one after the next will change. This is the only way we can improve as Turkey.”

Antalya, Agricultural Engineer, 50 years old

Moreover, it is noteworthy that one woman interviewed told about an effort to encourage women to obtain driver’s licenses. However, in one of the interviews, it was noted that there were men who protested against the trainings organized within the framework of the cooperative. Women’s awareness is seen as a threat, they are approached with prejudice, and they are criticized by the men around them: “The more trainings you provide, the more divorces occur,” they reportedly say.

Breaking out of the patriarchy

It was also noted during the interviews that women who wanted to join cooperatives but were prevented from doing so by their husbands and their husbands’ families were able to overcome this resistance over time and continue to work steadily in cooperatives. This pressure is felt more especially in extended families that do not have poverty problems and position themselves as well-known families, but it is stated that this resistance is broken with the insistence of women.

On the other hand, another participant made the following important statements, saying that they see cooperative activities as an opportunity for a transformation that will last for years in order to break free from patriarchal oppression:

“Since we grew up in a patriarchal society, the fact that we were raised with family pressures also has an impact on future generations. I am also the daughter of a very authoritarian family, but people, women or individuals need to develop, change and transform themselves. In this way, you also transform society. In the weakness of being brought up in such a way, if we have made something of ourselves, we share our knowledge with other individuals, the sooner we cut our losses, the better.”

Izmir, shopkeeper, 44 years old



Self-management

None of the women's cooperatives interviewed had any male members, except for one. In the case of Yusufeli, one of the founders of the cooperative is a man and he explains this as "There is no discrimination between men and women here". Women in other professions or in the public sector, who are often dominated by the "male manager" model, do not want to bring men into their cooperative organizations and state that they do not work with male stakeholders except for outsourced services. A cooperative representative from Mardin puts it

this way: *"We are the ones who labor, we are the ones who turn the wheel... Therefore, we women have to be in the decision-making mechanisms. We don't need rule from above, rule by men."*

On the other hand, a participant from Antalya noted that there is no hierarchy of subordinates and superiors in the management charts, and that everyone works together on everything at the same time and that all members are in equal positions.

Participation of local women

Some of the women's cooperatives interviewed are headquartered in villages and their members include women who live in villages. Women who previously spent their lives as livestock keepers and housewives, and had no opportunity to leave their villages, have found

a profession and income through cooperatives. In a village in Çanakkale, this is exemplified by the transition of women from families that subsist entirely on animal husbandry to a completely different and more comfortable line of work with their handicrafts.

Combating misogyny

One participant reminds us that women are stigmatized with such labels as "confrontational" and "scheming" through collective social misperception, and that these misper-

ceptions are transmitted through the "memory of the cell" and perpetuated by men, but that they can be eliminated through women's solidarity.



CHAPTER 4

RELATIONS WITH INSTITUTIONS
AND INTER REGIONAL DIALOGUE

INTER INSTITUTIONAL AND
INTER REGIONAL DIALOGUE
AND RELATIONS WITH CIVIL SOCIETY



RELATIONS WITH INSTITUTIONS AND INTER - REGIONAL DIALOGUE

Relations with local government and state

Local and central governments have policies in place to encourage and support women's cooperatives in particular. Interviews revealed that women's cooperatives across the country are divided into "cooperatives established with the support of municipalities or governorships" and "independent cooperatives". This distinction plays a decisive role in cooperatives' relations with local governments. All over Turkey, some municipalities are mobilizing their own resources to encourage women to establish cooperatives as they see fit. On the other hand, cooperatives founded by opponents or independents may not be on the radar of municipalities as much as their own cooperatives. For some cooperatives, this means easier access to the market for their products, which increases their sustainability, but for others it creates an unmanageable process, especially if the support is not sustained.

On the other hand, local governments or local authorities manually establishing cooperatives in order to receive state grants or to increase the women's employment rate on paper increases the quantity of cooperatives but weakens their quality and prevents them from being sustainable.

"The numbers of women's cooperatives should increase, how will they increase? Of course they will increase, they sit in their corner, they don't produce anything. But even if it reaches 10 thousand what's the use? And then we started producing. We don't have a car to take our products to Ankara. I mean, there are women's cooperatives, but how will these women's cooperatives market what they produce, who will take the products to the market? Then we took goods to Ankara by buses."

Ankara, entrepreneur 39 years old

A representative of an independent cooperative in Çanakkale, who describes their organization as a "grassroots movement", says that they go and meet with every municipality, that they refuse to buy a market place without paying for it, and that they feel the need to explain to municipal officials that what they are doing is not political activism but an effort to increase women's employment. **"We cannot be the backyard of any political party,"** she says.

Another cooperative member said, **"Not every municipality works with every cooperative. I don't know how municipalities choose the cooperatives they work with."** Another describes the situation as follows:

"The reason why cooperatives are dying in Turkey is because politics is involved... But I don't want it to be involved in women's cooperatives. Women can learn what a cooperative is on their own. If they put themselves forward, if they can do it without depending on a man, then it can be prevented."

Trabzon, sociologist, 63 years old

A cooperative member from Isparta expresses the practices of municipalities and problems such as not being able to find a place at fairs in the following words:

"The women here were victimized because of the conflict between the mayors. We went to Antalya to open a stand,

instead of here in Isparta. So many stands are opened in Isparta. But they didn't invite us or let us in because our mayor is from party a or party b."

Isparta, agricultural engineer, 35 years old

The above-mentioned situation is being experienced in Antalya in a different way in the context of fairs. It is reported that at the fair in Antalya, provincial and district municipalities did not visit cooperatives that they did not find close to them, invited some cooperatives from other cities that cannot produce anything to the fair, while neglecting the cooperatives that produce in the city only because of differences of political opinion.

The biggest problem with the establishment of cooperatives "by the state" is not only that municipalities and governorships encourage and even direct women to establish cooperatives, but also that some of the cooperatives established do not function, do not produce anything and do not contribute to employment at all. The cooperatives established in this way increase the quantity but do not present a promising picture in terms of quality, and the problem of closures or bankruptcy is also a problem. The interviews also revealed that cooperatives started or established through central or local government initiatives have problems with sustainability, which creates new burdens for women.

"Especially after the pandemic, there is a situation that I have unfortunately seen; some public and political organizations tell women to establish cooperatives. But if you don't have anything to produce and you are somehow made to establish it by someone else, it is difficult to ensure its sustainability."

Izmir, food engineer, 52 years old

Interviewees emphasized that the relationship between cooperatives and local governments has taken on a different character in Southern and East-

ern Anatolia and that this creates problems which can be summarized under the rubric of "before and after the trusteeship." There are examples of appointed trustees cutting off communication with cooperatives with which the elected mayor used to work, supporting new cooperatives, and some cooperatives facing market shortages because of that.

On the other hand, there are cooperatives that report that they have no problems, that they receive support from public administrators and local authorities, and that they benefit from grants. The words of an interviewee from Artvin's Hopa district on this issue are noteworthy:

"Everyone here cares about us. We had an iftar dinner last Friday. Mr. district governor, Mr. chief public prosecutor, police chief, they all came. We set up our table very nicely on the street here. We made everything ourselves, we did everything by hand. We enjoyed it very much and they respected us. You know, we were never blocked in the bureaucracy. We are very advantageous in this regard."

Artvin, entrepreneur 44 years old

Another founder from Antalya explains that they get financial support through product sales as follows:

"For example, I supply mantı [Turkish ravioli] to the cafeteria of the Provincial Directorate of Agriculture. Manti is an expensive product, so they may choose not to offer it, but you know they do it to support us. There are Patents Office, Development Agency, Agriculture Development Agency among our customers. At one point we supplied products to the Health Directorate."

Antalya, Retired, 50 years old



Inter institutional and inter regional dialogue and relations with civil society

Interviews conducted as part of the research revealed that the biggest supporters of women's cooperatives are again women's cooperatives. Cooperatives communicate with each other and help each other in different areas:

- Knowledge sharing at the foundation stage
- Experience sharing and guidance on intangible issues such as legislation and procedures that continue after the establishment
- Trading products with each other
- Directing customers to other women's cooperatives for products they do not have

The geographical form of this communication network can be considered in three ways:

- 1) Women's cooperatives within the same city
- 2) Women's cooperatives within the same region
- 3) Meetings and communication between women's cooperatives across Turkey.

Women's cooperatives are also in close contact with civil society organizations. For some cooperatives, this contact translates into meaningful support, while for others it is more introverted and distanced from external civil society structures. In the interviews, two organizations stood out among the civil society organizations that women's cooperatives receive support from: Foundation for the Utilization of Women's Labor (KEDV) and SIMURG, founded by KEDV. Interviews conducted as part of the research revealed that cooperatives have received programs from

these two civil society organizations, including training support, virtual and real market support for product sales, capacity building training, and leadership training.

KEDV¹⁴, presents itself as an organization which believes that the changes that will create communities free of inequality and poverty can be realized through the collective, participatory power and transformative leadership of low-income women. KEDV also notes that the Women's Cooperatives Movement, which they started quietly in 2000, now reaches tens of thousands of women across Turkey every year. With this approach and its activities, KEDV has been the umbrella civil organization for women's cooperatives since 2001. Founded in 2002 and notable for its "Cooperative Handbook and Cooperative Articles of Association", SIMURG¹⁵ is a non-governmental organization that brings together women's cooperatives, organizes meetings and established the Women's Cooperatives Union.

In addition, large and small support received from various civil society organizations in different provinces and cooperatives is also noted. The Women's Labour and Employment Initiative, TURKONFED, Sabancı Foundation, Habitat Association, Women and Democracy Association, and Development Agencies are mentioned among these organizations. It is also noted that the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), an international organization, and some banks in the private sector provide support to cooperatives within the scope of entrepreneurship.

14. <https://bit.ly/3k6ln4w>

15. <https://simurg.org.tr/hakkimizda>

In general, cooperative members report that they do not have any problems with other cooperatives in their city or in other cities, and that they do not experience any competitive conflicts. In some cities or districts, communication between cooperatives is quite advanced and a network of solidarity has been established through an “invisible pact”.

“There are a few cooperatives with which we work very well. When we receive an order, if we cannot produce it, we direct it to other cooperatives. This is actually the purpose of the cooperative, we consider not only the interests of our own cooperative but that of women, that’s why we direct some orders to other cooperatives.”

Izmir, Certified Public Accountant,
44 years old

Similarly, a cooperative from Ankara said that they cooperate with another cooperative in Biga, Çanakkale, a cooperative from Hakkari said that they are in close contact with Antalya, and a cooperative from Mardin said that they host different cooperatives every month both from within Mardin and from across Turkey.

On the other hand, women’s cooperatives from different cities also host each other. Members who meet on social media or at fairs visit each other on long-distance trips to exchange information about their work and this helps them to overcome their prejudices about different cities and regions.



CHAPTER 5

APPROACH TO PROBLEMS

APPROACH TO PROBLEMS

Problems faced by cooperative members

Apart from the economic crisis, the most important challenge women's cooperatives face is the ambiguity of cooperative legislation in Turkey and the fact that founding members are not familiar with the legislation and try to learn it by groping their way through it. The fact that cooperatives are affiliated to both the Ministry of Trade and the Ministry of Agriculture creates regulatory uncertainties, and overcoming these uncertainties is the biggest obstacle for cooperatives in the establishment phase. Turkey's cooperative system, which does not have many examples and has not yet become widespread, makes it difficult to establish cooperatives, as there is no clear legislation and no clear way of proceeding.

“We need serious changes in legislation. Because as the Ministry of Trade, they see us as a company. In fact, we are social cooperatives. I mean in terms of taxation. This is not a place to be established so that someone can be the president, nor is it a place to be given a title. For example, municipalities establish a cooperative, they put someone as the president, they say you are the president, but there is no such world. So this is not the purpose and essence of it. And if you don't have an economy based on production, if you have no unity, it is not possible to do this. So you have to contribute to the economy, you have to produce value-added products.”

Izmir, Food Engineer, 52 years old

One of the biggest problems women's cooperatives face is economic hardship and the 18%

tax on the sale of their products. In this regard, the founding members suggest that the Ministry of Agriculture and the Ministry of Finance should sign a protocol, demanding, **“they should exempt us from VAT. Don't lump us in with the big capitalized companies.”** In one example, obtaining the permits from the Provincial Directorate of Agriculture (at the time of establishment) just to get the cooperative's workshop up and running was a cost burden of 120,000 TL. The complaints of some cooperative representatives that they cannot earn money and that they spend out of their pockets are not insignificant.

The vital importance of grants from international organizations cannot be overstated. However, such grants are also problematic in practice, as they are not gratuitous, and they place an additional burden on women's cooperatives in terms of repayment, especially in terms of taxation.

Cooperative members say that they faced difficulties during the establishment phase because they were not familiar with the operation of the cooperative other than the legislation. According to one interviewee in Ankara, the biggest problem is that members of cooperatives are not aware of each other, and that there is a lack of communication between women's cooperatives at the city and national levels.

When establishing a cooperative, members only pay a small one-time participation fee and are otherwise not liable. However, prospective members who are willing to join cooperatives but lack sufficient information about the nature of the cooperative structure are hesitant to do so, especially when they are concerned about the negative consequences of a commercial structure. It is therefore necessary to inform prospective members who may have the mistaken belief that they will be in debt if the cooperative fails commercially and goes bankrupt, and who may therefore show reluctance.



One of the challenges that women's cooperatives face is the lack of materials and staff at the start-up stage. Women, most of whom are housewives and have no field experience, say that they are amateurs, especially when it comes to areas of work that require service.

Interestingly, some cooperative representatives say that in addition to all the problems they face, they also suffer from **"male jealousy"**. The fact that women's cooperatives survive while men's cooperatives in the same city are constantly being dissolved creates competition between the sexes, which is another challenge. On the other hand, it is often emphasized that being a woman itself is fraught with difficulties due to cultural codes. A woman in Artvin expresses this with the words **"Being a woman in Artvin is the biggest challenge in itself"**.

In another example from the Black Sea region, the interviewee stated that the most important problem is "ignorance". She said that the villagers in her family's village, who make a living from animal husbandry, sell products such as milk and eggs to a person who comes to the village and buys them from the producers at a low price, and that the middleman makes a big profit from this trade, but that the villagers find the cooperative organization "risky" and avoid it because they do not know about it. One of the wom-

en interviewed said that hearsay information about dues, membership fees and bankruptcy had turned into a kind of cooperative phobia among villagers, and that **"The problem is that the trainings are given to men. Men do not listen. If the same training were given to women, there would be more progress."**

In cooperatives, there may be differences of opinion among members from time to time. In the interviews, it was generally found that this situation did not turn into a problem, and that differences of opinion and differences in political attitudes did not cause any problems in the functioning of the cooperative. The 7 Principles of Cooperatives are known by cooperative members, and members are reminded of the rule of adherence to these principles when problems arise. A founding member of an independent cooperative in Çanakkale says, **"In disagreements and problems that arise, the 7 Principles should be remembered, the 7 Principles should be referred to."** Another participant explained that their cooperative has members from different faiths and views: **"We all participated in the March 8 rally together. One of our aunts went upstairs to pray, came down and said, 'Let's go to March 8!'"** Another from Isparta said that they had developed the solution of "not talking politics among themselves" in order to avoid political differences in the first place.

Women cooperatives' perspective on Turkey's problems

Participants think that Turkey's most important problem is the economic crisis. The economic crisis raises production costs, which has a direct impact on the businesses they work in. One interviewee said, "Turkey's biggest problem is the economy. Until 3 weeks ago we were selling pancakes for 15 liras, now butter is 130 liras. Olive oil has reached 70, 80, 90. I started selling pancakes for 20 liras. The woman and the child come to buy pancakes, if they did, they would leave the stall flying like birds. But the woman

cannot buy it for herself, she only buys it for the child and leaves."

Another said, **"Turkey's biggest problem is foreign dependency. Our biggest problem is that the prices of raw materials go up every 2 days."** Another interviewee draws attention to the extent to which the crisis prevents cooperatives from making money as follows: **"We used to buy flour for 290 a sack, but suddenly it became 450. We were buying sugar**

for 6 liras and now it is 12-13 liras. These are our main ingredients, and since we do it at a slightly affordable price as a cooperative, and since 13 of us share the profit, we are working on a voluntary basis now. The gas cylinder we buy for 280 liras this week, we buy it for 330 the next week. In other words, the economic crisis eliminates earnings in terms of material income.”

Almost all of the interviews emphasized that the economic crisis affects women’s cooperatives directly or indirectly, depending on the field in which they operate. Increasing costs of products such as flour, butter and sugar, as well as electricity charges, are deeply affecting food producer cooperatives. On the other hand, a representative of a cooperative that produces souvenirs in Isparta states that their products have been relegated to the background by consumers due to the decline in purchasing power, and that while the need for food continues in any case, products such as souvenirs and jewelry are not in demand as before. However, the economic crisis and the high cost of transportation have driven up transportation costs, which was mentioned in almost all the interviews. A cooperative in Diyarbakir said that they asked Atatürk Forest Farm for used boxes to box their products and used the waste materials to prepare the cargo packages for their products.

Women also address the issue of violence against women together with the issue of economic freedom. It is stated that most of the women subjected to violence endure violence because they do not have economic freedom. Accordingly they argue that the state should provide economic support to women and free them from forced dependency.

Education is the second most important problem in Turkey, with one interviewee saying, **“The biggest problem in Turkey is education. I think that education is a really big problem, that there is no education in the national education provided by the state.”**

In addition to these problems, the women interviewed see unemployment and the inability to employ people over a certain age, the problem of masculinity, misogyny, the lack of a women’s ministry, and women being confined to the Ministry of

Family as some of the leading problems in Turkey. The country’s shift away from agriculture and the slowdown in production, marginalization and problems in the field of health are also highlighted.

Participants’ approaches to social issues vary depending on their political stance, socioeconomic status and character differences. However, despite this variability, it is clear that the vast majority of respondents cited the economic crisis as Turkey’s biggest problem. Participants’ views on the causes of the crisis are divided into two groups. According to the first group, the economic crisis is the reflection of a global crisis on Turkey and is not solely Turkey’s problem. According to the second group, the economic crisis is the result of wrong economic policies in Turkey and is Turkey’s problem. The views in the second group are shared more than the views in the first group.

In the interviews, it is seen that the participants are also sensitive about “violence against women” among social issues. They draw attention to the fact that femicides and violence against women are not on Turkey’s agenda enough, and emphasize the need for much greater and more deterrent laws and measures to be taken to prevent these incidents. Pointing to gender inequality as one of Turkey’s biggest problems, one interviewee stated that women are suppressed and that suppression hinders development.

One interviewee in Ankara cited lack of autonomy and the limits of freedom of thought in reacting to social issues among the problems they experienced

“Do we need to have a stance against HEPP (Hydroelectric Power Plant), do we need to say something against [Turkey’s withdrawal from] Istanbul Convention? We are experiencing these hesitations. These can be perceived differently by other groups. And yet, we are struggling against women’s poverty and trying to create solutions.”

Ankara, Civil society worker, 28 years old

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSIONS AND
RECOMMENDATIONS

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Considering that women's employment in Turkey was less than half that of men in 2021, according to the Turkish Statistical Institute (TÜİK), the contribution of women's cooperatives to women's employment is obvious. The most obvious and tangible achievements of women's cooperatives are the utilisation of women's labour, the transformation of women's domestic production into material gain, and the ability of women who have not been able to participate in working life for various gender-related reasons to leave the house and start working. In this way, women's cooperatives alleviate the state's burden on women's employment, doing what the state should do and opening up workspaces for women. On the other hand, when analysed more abstractly, cooperatives also provide women with many other benefits. Visible gains such as meeting and socialising with other women in the city where they live, reducing exposure to domestic violence, digital literacy, self-confidence and personal space, and spiritual satisfaction are achieved. These advantages have a positive impact not only on the women themselves, but also on their children and families, fueling a modest social transformation. In short, cooperatives empower women and provide the space and opportunity needed by women who are willing to become self-reliant individuals.

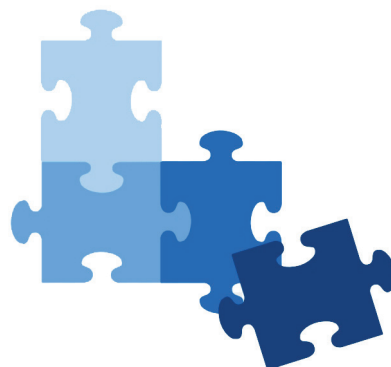
Women's cooperatives face many problems and challenges, but the three most prominent ones are lack of funding/ lack of financial support, unclear legislation and procedures, and political interference in cooperatives.

Women's cooperatives, which are outside the general cooperative sector in Turkey, have weak relations with the state, are isolated financially when they do not have any political power behind them, and have to make extra efforts to prove their legitimacy, create the gains mentioned in the first paragraph "despite" all these obstacles. Women's cooperatives play an important role in women's empowerment and empowerment, and with a little legal regulation and financial support, they can have a much greater positive impact on women's lives in Turkey and attain a more respected and meaningful position.

Cooperatives should not be mechanisms established to access resources provided by the state. Cooperatives should be established on the basis of the founders' own motivation and need, and the search for funding and support should start from this need. Another dilemma is the danger of women's cooperatives being confined to "women-only" fields of work. While there are dozens of cooperatives operating in areas such as home cooking, handicrafts, baklava and pastry making, there are no professional cooperatives such as the architect women's cooperative or the pharmacist women's cooperative. In the big picture, the cooperative sector contributes to the development of women, but from this perspective, it continues to confine women to a limited area. As a solution to this problem, there is a need to provide incentives for qualified women from different professions to form cooperatives.

Suggestions for the solution of problems

- The most frequently suggested and demanded issue is the bureaucratic unification of cooperative legislation under a single roof, the centralisation of all procedures and the simplification of the establishment process.
- Recognition of social cooperatives in the legislation is requested.
- 18% VAT liability is requested to be lifted.
- Among the demands are that municipalities be banned from partnering with cooperatives and that every incoming municipality be required by law to publicly support all cooperatives, without discriminating against any cooperative.
- Some members of the cooperative pointed to the fact that Turkey is a country that receives a lot of migration, and suggested that refugee women should be trained. They suggest that with training and inclusion activities, Syrian refugee women in particular can form cooperatives and join existing cooperative structures, just like Turkish cooperative workers. This change can transform Syrian refugee women from being guests to contributing to production and the national economy.
- The members of the cooperatives generally demand that the municipalities and governorships provide support in terms of showing a market place, providing office space, covering expenses such as rent and natural gas without discriminating between cooperatives.
- Supporting women's cooperatives to provide the necessary equipment (stock and shipping) to open stores on large e-commerce websites is recommended.
- The suggestion of creating a sales market abroad is frequently voiced, as it is thought to increase the income of the cooperatives significantly.
- Machinery, logistic support, equipment and transportation support are among their main demands. Stating that costs have increased especially due to the difficulty of shipping liquid products, members need support in shipping natural products.
- Promotional support is also among the demands. There is a need to produce promotional materials such as websites, social media, posters, brochures and to provide the necessary costs for these.
- Among the important demands is that the support should be free of payment for at least 2 years.





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