

Empowering Women through Food Production from the Perspective of Cooperatives

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Abstract

Cooperatives are increasingly seen as alternatives to profit-driven food systems, offering economic and social inclusion for disadvantaged groups, particularly women. This study examines women's perceptions and experiences within food production cooperatives in Türkiye, focusing on the Antalya Köy Pazarı Women's Cooperative. Drawing on participant observation and semi-structured interviews, the study explores motivations for participation, daily impacts, and cooperative operations. Findings indicate that economic independence is the primary motivator, but social benefits such as confidence-building, knowledge sharing, and community engagement are equally significant. Women's cooperatives emerge as key mechanisms for fostering empowerment, enhancing well-being, and strengthening women's roles in both family and society. The research highlights the transformative potential of cooperatives as inclusive and sustainable models in food systems.

Key words: Food Production Cooperatives; Gender Equality; Economic Empowerment

1. Introduction

Since the onset of industrialization, the traditional corporate model has dominated food production and distribution, often prioritizing profit over social and environmental concerns. However, in recent years, there has been a growing interest in alternative business models that emphasize community-oriented, environmentally friendly, and socially conscious approaches to food systems. While not a new concept, cooperatives have emerged as prominent alternatives to conventional structures in the food sector (UN, 2023).

By nature, cooperatives aim to support the interests of all members—producers, workers, or consumers. They offer opportunities to empower local communities, promote sustainable agricultural practices, and build a more inclusive and equitable food system. Unlike centralized corporate decision-making, cooperatives operate through democratic processes, positioning them within the scope of social entrepreneurship.

Feminism, as a movement advocating for gender equality and women's empowerment, plays a significant role in women's cooperatives. Emerging in the 19th century, feminism evolved through various phases. Liberal feminism was one of the earliest strands, highlighting women's secondary position in society and calling for equal participation. In contrast, Marxist feminism explains women's oppression through modes of production and patriarchal labor relations, where women's labor is appropriated by male figures (Black, 1984; Taş, 2016).

A core goal of feminism is women's economic independence, which requires equal access to education and skill development. Women's cooperatives serve as platforms where women gain control over their labor, access learning opportunities, and improve their skills. Beyond economic empowerment, these cooperatives enhance women's social participation, self-confidence, and access to networks and resources.

In Türkiye, women's cooperatives operate under the Cooperative Law No. 1163 (KEİG, 2018). However, due to traditional gender roles, they are often treated as a distinct category with a strong emphasis on local development and women's socio-economic inclusion. The Marmara Region hosts the highest number of women's cooperatives (Table1), followed by the Mediterranean, Black Sea, and Central Anatolia regions.

Table1. Geographic Distribution of Women's Cooperatives in Türkiye (Şahankaya Adar et al., 2023).

Geographical Area	Active	Passive
Marmara	182	3
Aegean	130	-
Central Anatolia	157	1
Mediterranean	154	-
Black Sea	155	-
Eastern Anatolia	89	-
Southeast Anatolia	73	-
Total	940	4

An important milestone in this field was the “Empowerment of Women through Cooperatives” project (2021–2024), jointly implemented by the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry and the General Directorate on the Status of Women. Co-financed by the EU, this initiative led to the formation of the Women’s Cooperative Network. Member cooperatives are active in areas such as production, services, marketing, and other sectors. Among them, production cooperatives are most common (Url-1).

This study aims to understand the relationships that women establish with food production cooperatives and the role these organizations play in their lives. The central research question is: “What are the perceptions and experiences of women members of food production cooperatives regarding their cooperatives?” Antalya, one of Turkey’s major agricultural cities, was selected as the research site. Of the 22 women’s cooperatives operating in Antalya, 15 are engaged in food production, with four located in Kepez, a socioeconomically disadvantaged district. While there is a growing body of literature on women’s food production cooperatives, each cooperative and its members have unique experiences and relationships with their organization. This diversity underscores the importance of examining cooperatives within their specific socio-spatial contexts. Accordingly, this research adopts a qualitative, phenomenological design, and selects the Antalya Köy Pazarı Women’s Cooperative as a case study. Data were collected through participant observation and semi-structured interviews with cooperative members, and analyzed using content analysis. The experiences of cooperative members are categorized into three main themes: motivation, impact on daily life, and cooperative operation.

2.Methodology

2.1 Research Context and Case Selection

This study adopts a phenomenological qualitative research design to explore the lived experiences of women engaged in a food production cooperative in Antalya, Türkiye. Phenomenology is particularly suitable for understanding how individuals perceive, interpret, and make sense of specific phenomena through their personal experiences (Tekindal & Uğuz Arsu, 2020). The selected case is the Antalya Köy Pazarı Women’s Cooperative, established in 2019 in partnership with the Kepez Municipality. This cooperative produce and sells a variety of natural food products, including honey, tahini, molasses, vinegar, and gluten-free flours. The phenomenological approach enables an in-depth exploration of the subjective meanings that cooperative members assign to their roles and involvement in the organization.

2.2 Data Collection

Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews and participant observation. Two interview protocols were designed: one for founding members (management) and one for cooperative workers. The questions were grouped into thematic blocks covering general background, motivations, daily life impact, and roles within the cooperative (Table 2).

Table 2. Semi-Structured Interview Question Groups

Group Code	Question Groups	Focus of Questions
A2	Cooperative foundation, motivation and operation	Reason for founding Why a women's cooperative Challenges during establishment Current problems
A3	Impact on daily life	Decision-making processes How it changed your life Part of daily routine Being a woman Being a female entrepreneur Reactions from others
A4	Role in the cooperative	Relationships among members Impact on women's lives Unforgettable memory Future goals
B2	Impact on daily life	Previous life How it changed How she feels Workload Reactions from others Daily routine
B3	Motivation and expectations	Decision to join Motivation Why a women's cooperative How she defines it Social relationships with co-workers
B4	Role in the cooperative	Responsibilities Cooperation and mutual support What it brought to you Current problems Unforgettable memory Future goals

Three women with varying roles within the cooperative participated in the study: one manager, one producer, and one social media coordinator. Due to scheduling and accessibility constraints, two interviews were conducted by phone and one was conducted in person at the cooperative's production site. Interview durations ranged from 32 minutes to 79 minutes, with an average length of 59 minutes. All interviews were audio recorded with the participants' consent and later transcribed. Informal communication prior to interviews helped establish rapport. To support the interviews, participant observation was conducted at the cooperative's production site. This method allowed the researcher to gain contextual insights into daily operations, interpersonal dynamics, and the physical environment in which the cooperative operates. Field notes were taken during the visit, which enriched the interpretation of the interview data.

2.3 Sampling Strategy

A purposeful sampling strategy was employed to select participants who could provide rich and relevant insights into the cooperative experience. A chain sampling technique was applied, whereby initial contact with a key informant led to the recruitment of additional participants. The sample included individuals with diverse roles

and experiences within the cooperative to ensure a variety of perspectives.

2.4 Validity, Reliability, and Ethical Considerations

To ensure credibility, two qualitative techniques was applied through multiple data sources (interviews, observation). Interview questions were derived from both literature and field knowledge. Member-checking was informally conducted by maintaining open channels with participants for follow-up clarification. Audio recordings were transcribed, and coding consistency was ensured through iterative reading.

Ethical approval was not required for this study. However, verbal consent was obtained from both the cooperative and individual participants. Participants were informed about the study's aims, and interviews were conducted in spaces and times they found comfortable. Audio recordings were made with permission; otherwise, notes were taken during the conversation.

2.5 Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was employed using both inductive and deductive approaches. Transcripts and field notes were coded and categorized using MAXQDA 2024. Codes were grouped into three main themes: Motivations, Impacts on Daily Life (Figure 2), and Cooperative Operation (Figure 3).

•Motivations included both social (e.g., solidarity, socialization, environmental values) and economic drivers (e.g., financial independence, employment) (Figure 1).



Figure 1. Motivation Theme Hierarchical Code Model

•Impacts on Daily Life covered perceived benefits (e.g., personal development, social relationships), responses from family/community, and peer interactions at the workplace.

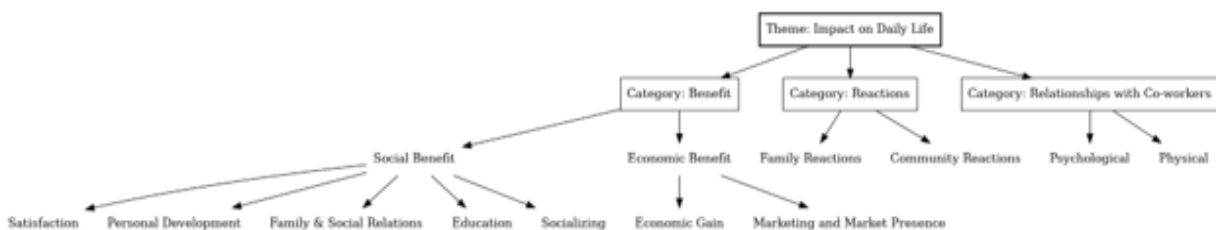


Figure 2. Impacts on Daily Life Theme Hierarchical Code Sub-Code Model

•Cooperative Operation explored internal organization, roles, challenges (e.g., market competition, lack of external support), and collaboration mechanisms.



Figure 3. Cooperative Operation Theme Hierarchical Code Model

These themes reflect the complexity of women's engagement in food production cooperatives, encompassing both personal transformations and institutional constraints.

3.Findings

A word cloud was generated based on the transcripts of the interviews. The visualization was created using MAXQDA, which analyzes all the words in the uploaded document. Accordingly, in the creation of the word cloud, the interviewer's statements were excluded, and only the participants' expressions were considered. Different grammatical forms of the same word were merged. As expected due to the nature of the study, the most prominent words in the cloud are "cooperative" and "woman." Additionally, words such as "production," "market," and "product" also stand out, aligning with the research topic. These are followed by possessive terms like "own," "mine," and "we." Furthermore, words such as "more," "big," "as much as," "included," "a lot," and "now," which imply a forward-looking perspective or comparisons between past and present, are also highlighted. This indicates that participants tend to interpret their relationship with the cooperative through a sense of ownership and temporal comparison (Figure 4).



Figure 4. Word Cloud

The findings of the study were coded under three main themes: Motivation, Impact on Daily Life, and Cooperative Operation, as described in the previous section. A code cloud was created based on the frequency of these codes (Figure 5). In this visualization, green tones represent codes under the Motivation theme, blue tones represent codes under the Impact on Daily Life theme, and red tones represent codes under the Cooperative Operation theme. The most frequently repeated color in the code cloud is blue, indicating that the Impact on Daily Life theme contains more codes and sub-codes compared to the other themes.



Figure 5. Code Cloud

3.1. Motivations

Under the theme of Motivation, the study primarily aims to answer the research sub-questions regarding participants' perceptions of the cooperative and their reasons for joining. The findings are grouped into two main categories: **economic motivation** and **social motivation**.

Although one might expect economic concerns to be the primary reason for joining the cooperative, "solidarity and mutual support" emerged as a crucial underlying factor for women's participation. Within the dimension of economic motivation, the sub-code economic independence was frequently emphasized. For the participants in this study—already engaged in production prior to joining—the concept of economic independence is interpreted as the ability to earn income through their own labor.

Many of the women had previously sold products at the Antalya Village Market but remained financially dependent on their spouses or families. Participation in the cooperative enabled them to achieve economic autonomy. According to Participant 1 (K1), women who previously sold their goods at prices far below market value through informal channels started to sell at market prices through the cooperative. Moreover, the cooperative's policy of purchasing unsold goods provided an additional economic incentive.

Another economic factor mentioned was education and employment. Although not a primary motivation for joining the cooperative, participants acknowledged receiving training as part of state- or municipality-supported initiatives. The fact that all participants were already producers before joining suggests that economic motivation stemmed more from a desire for independence from male-dominated financial structures than from an intent to enter employment from scratch.

The code with the highest number of references under the Motivation theme is solidarity and mutual support, which falls under social motivation. Participants frequently emphasized the significance of producing together and being united. The word cloud (Figure 4) also highlights the prominence of the collective identity expressed through the term "we." While economic concerns were motivating factors for Participants 1 and 2, Participant 3 joined the cooperative solely to support the other members.

Socialization also emerged as a motivational factor. The importance of socialization is partly due to participants already knowing each other through the market setting before the cooperative was formed. During the interviews, participants noted that they also interact outside the cooperative—visiting each other, meeting at the office, and developing close bonds. This suggests that socialization and solidarity are intertwined and mutually reinforcing motivations for participation. The women perceive the cooperative and the village market as an integrated space for social engagement.

3.2. Impact on Daily Life

The theme Impact on Daily Life aims to understand how women cooperative members experience the cooperative and how it is reflected in their daily lives. This theme comprises the categories of Benefit, Relationship with Co-workers, and Reactions. The category Benefit includes two subcategories: Social Benefit and Economic Benefit. The findings suggest that the women's food production cooperative primarily contributes to social benefits in members' lives.

Key codes under social benefits include satisfaction, personal development, and socialization, while education and family and social relations are mentioned less frequently. Participants 1 and 3 stated that being part of the cooperative provides them with a sense of satisfaction. For Participant 1, this satisfaction is related to professional achievements, while for Participant 3, it is rooted in social fulfillment. Participant 2 sees the cooperative, especially the office setting, as a space for socializing and meeting friends. Participants emphasized that the training received during the cooperative's founding phase significantly contributed to their personal development and boosted their self-confidence.

Regarding family and social relations, participants shared stories of other cooperative members. One participant referred to a member with a child with disabilities, stating that the cooperative not only provided economic benefits but also improved family dynamics and the member's self-esteem.

The most prominent code under Economic Benefit is marketing and market presence. Women's cooperatives have enabled producers—who previously sold only within limited, informal networks—to reach broader audiences and gain brand visibility. Participation in the cooperative has also integrated women into the formal economy. Thanks to the cooperative's structure, women no longer worry about selling their products; knowing their products will generate income through the cooperative enhances the significance of earning through one's own production.

Although the relationship between members and their colleagues is categorized under both psychological and physical aspects, the psychological connection cannot be separated from the social benefits. Cooperative members do not view their colleagues merely as coworkers, but as part of a community. This strong bond stems from prior acquaintances and the small size of the group. The challenges faced during the cooperative's founding also reinforced their sense of belonging.

Under the category Reactions, participants reflected on the support (or lack thereof) from their families and communities. Many mentioned that joining the cooperative was a joint family decision. They stated that family support was essential for maintaining membership. Notably, some women who were initially involved had to leave due to lack of support from their husbands. This highlights that family backing—especially spousal support—is crucial for women's continued participation. Participant 1 emphasized that women understood the expenditures required during the cooperative's early phase, but their husbands often lacked patience. Families that were initially skeptical became more supportive once women began generating income, thus increasing the women's influence within the household.

3.3. Cooperative Operation

Under the theme Cooperative Operation, two primary categories were identified: Support and Collaboration, and Challenges. According to the coding, these two categories are distributed relatively equally. This theme covers aspects of the cooperative's internal functioning that do not directly align with the first two themes (Motivation and Impact on Daily Life), thereby addressing more operational and structural dynamics.

Within the Support and Collaboration category, the most prominent code is projects and grants. This is followed by roles within the cooperative and organizational model and personal resources and informal networks. Participants emphasized that receiving government support during the establishment phase made being a woman an advantage rather than a disadvantage. This reflects the structural challenges women often face in society and within their families, positioning external support as a key enabler for women's collective entrepreneurship.

Under the Challenges category, lack of community support emerged as the most frequently mentioned issue. Participants often referred not only to their own experiences, but also to those of former members who left the cooperative during its early stages, highlighting a strong emotional attachment and the social impact of those departures.

Other recurring challenges—market competition, financial support, production space, and consumer profile—are intrinsic to the broader dynamics of cooperatives in general and women's cooperatives in particular. These include limited competitiveness against large brands, financial dependence on internal resources, low consumer awareness, and limited purchasing power in the local market.

Despite these practical barriers, lack of community support stands out as a particularly significant issue for women's cooperatives, indicating the socio-cultural resistance that women face when entering public and economic spaces as independent actors.

4. Conclusion

This study aims to explore the perceptions and experiences of women who are members of food production cooperatives. The findings indicate that women's cooperatives not only contribute to members' economic empowerment but also provide significant social benefits. Participants perceive the cooperative as a major part of their social lives and fulfill their social needs through it. In the case examined—comprising women who were already engaged in production before joining the cooperative—it was observed that those who received family support were more likely to remain in the cooperative, reporting strengthened relationships with their families and communities, along with increased self-confidence. Conversely, members who lacked family support tended to withdraw from the cooperative, highlighting the critical role of the family in shaping women's economic and social engagement.

Overall, the findings reveal that women's food production cooperatives have positive impacts on members' economic, social, and personal well-being. Moreover, for cooperative members, the cooperative and their colleagues hold meaning beyond economic income. Considering women's roles within the family and society, these cooperatives emerge as vital social enterprises that promote women's participation in the economy and strengthen their positions in both familial and societal contexts.

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