

Women's Cooperatives in Turkey: Challenges, Success Stories, and Policy Recommendations

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Abstract

The review on women cooperatives in Turkey highlights the instrumental role these organizations play in empowering women economically and socially. Women's cooperatives have emerged as critical vehicles for fostering economic independence, political participation, and community development, particularly in rural areas. These cooperatives provide women with the opportunity to pool resources, gain entrepreneurial skills, and access markets. Table 1 in the review showcases various sectors in which women's cooperatives operate, including agriculture, handicrafts, tourism, education, health, and eco-friendly businesses. For instance, cooperatives focusing on organic farming and traditional crafts have become influential in local markets, offering both economic and cultural benefits. Similarly, women-led initiatives in tourism and hospitality, such as eco-tourism projects and guesthouses, have contributed to sustainable development by promoting local culture and offering employment opportunities. Table 2 elaborates on the success stories of women's cooperatives in Turkey, such as Kadın Emegini Değerlendirme Vakfı (KEDV) and Bodrum Kadın Girişim Kooperatifi. These examples illustrate how cooperatives have enabled women to achieve financial independence, expand market reach, and enhance their local communities. For example, KEDV-supported cooperatives in Kocaeli have created stable employment through the production and sale of organic food and handicrafts, while Bodrum's cooperative has gained success by focusing on high-quality, locally sourced food products. However, challenges such as cultural barriers, financial constraints, and legal hurdles, as outlined in Table 3, continue to limit the potential of these cooperatives. The Turkish government has introduced several initiatives, including amendments to cooperatives law and financial support programs, to address these issues and foster the growth of women's cooperatives across the country. The significance of the paper lies in its comprehensive exploration of women's cooperatives and self-help groups (SHGs) in Turkey, highlighting their role as powerful tools for economic and social empowerment.

Keywords: Women's Cooperatives, Self-Help Groups, Turkey Government, Empowerment

Introduction

Women's cooperatives and self-help groups (SHGs) have emerged as vital instruments for economic empowerment and social upliftment in various countries. These collectives provide a platform for women to pool resources, share knowledge, and support each other in their entrepreneurial endeavors. The role of women's cooperatives and self-help groups (SHGs) has become increasingly significant in promoting economic and social empowerment, particularly in contexts where traditional socio-economic systems have marginalized women. In Turkey, these collectives provide a platform for women to pool resources, share knowledge, and support each other in entrepreneurial endeavors. Such initiatives are essential, as they address not only economic inequalities but also cultural and social barriers that hinder women's participation in the workforce. The study of women's cooperatives in Turkey is thus crucial, given the unique challenges and opportunities present in the country's socio-economic landscape.

This research aims to explore the significance and impact of women's cooperatives in Turkey, focusing on their role in fostering economic independence, political participation, and community development. Understanding the dynamics of these cooperatives is important for several reasons. Firstly, they offer a model of inclusive economic growth by integrating marginalized women into the formal economy, thereby enhancing their financial stability and societal status. Secondly, they contribute to local development by promoting sustainable business practices and creating employment opportunities in sectors such as agriculture, handicrafts, tourism, and education. Moreover, these cooperatives serve as vehicles for advancing gender equality and women's rights, by nurturing leadership skills and encouraging collective action.

The need to study women's cooperatives in Turkey arises from the potential they hold in transforming both individual lives and communities. Despite the significant strides made, these cooperatives still face numerous challenges, including cultural barriers, limited access to finance, and regulatory hurdles. By examining the successes and obstacles encountered by these groups, the study seeks to provide valuable insights for policymakers, development practitioners, and scholars interested in women's empowerment and cooperative development.

In particular, this review will highlight the transformative impact of women's cooperatives on community development and their contribution to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. By shedding light on the experiences and success stories of various cooperatives, such as Kadın Emegini Değerlendirme Vakfı (KEDV) and Bodrum Kadın Girişim Kooperatifi, the paper aims to illustrate how these organizations enable women to achieve financial independence, expand their market reach, and improve their communities. The findings of this study are expected to underscore the importance of supportive policies and targeted interventions in enhancing the effectiveness and sustainability of women's cooperatives, not only in Turkey but also in similar socio-economic settings worldwide.

Women's Cooperatives in Turkey

Turkey has a long, well-established history of cooperatives between the 13th and 19th centuries, known as the Ahi institution, which was based on a set of moral, economic, social, and political values. The development of women's cooperatives in Turkey was founded in

the post-2000s and cooperatives as a model of organization for women have been a very new, exciting, and active subject in Turkey. The first women's cooperatives in Turkey were established in 1999 and the most recent International Labour Organization (ILO) report indicated that there are currently 297 active women's cooperatives in Turkey with 4,332 members registered with the Ministry of Trade (Ugur-Cinar, 2024). The women's cooperatives are mostly home-centered with small arts and crafts cooperatives which among them is related to consumption, agricultural development, and management cooperatives. The potential possessed by women's cooperatives was seen as a source of hope by many women in Turkey. Most of the members of these cooperatives are middle-aged, low-income, and married women with many children. They come from a background of very little education, training, and work experience before the establishment of these cooperatives. Therefore, this study demonstrates that even though cooperatives provide women with some leverage in the system, there are still legal and political impediments that prevent women from reaching their fullest potential through this initiative.

Business Potential & Community Engagement

In Turkey, women's cooperatives alone become increasingly influential in the business landscape, particularly in sectors that align with traditional skills and local needs. The table below describes some notable examples of businesses controlled by women's cooperatives in Turkey:

Table 1

Business Potential & Community Engagement

Business Sector	Specification
Agriculture and Food Production	<p>Organic Farming: Many women's cooperatives engage in organic farming, growing fruits, vegetables, and herbs. These products are often sold at local markets, organic shops, or through community-supported agriculture (CSA) programs.</p> <p>Food products: Cooperatives produce and market traditional Turkish food items such as jams, pickles, sauces, and baked goods whereas this Village Cooperatives (Koy Kooperatifi) model often focuses on regional specialties and organic products.</p>
Handicrafts and Textiles	<p>Traditional Crafts: Traditional Turkish handicrafts, such as carpets, kilims, embroidery, and lace are sold locally, or through online platforms.</p> <p>Fashion and Apparel: Some cooperatives focus on producing clothing and accessories, often incorporating traditional designs and techniques. They may be run by small boutiques or participate in fashion markets and exhibitions.</p>
Tourism and Hospitality	<p>Eco-tourism: Cooperatives may develop eco-tourism initiatives, offering experiences such as rural homestays, guided tours, and cultural workshops. These initiatives often aim to promote sustainable tourism and showcase local culture.</p>

Guesthouses and Cafes:	Some cooperatives operate guesthouses, cafes, and restaurants that highlight local cuisine and hospitality. These establishments provide income for cooperative members and offer visitors a taste of local culture.
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Educational and Cultural Initiatives	<p>Workshops and Training: Cooperatives may offer workshops on traditional crafts, cooking, and other skills, providing additional income and sharing cultural heritage with others.</p> <p>Cultural Events: They might organize or participate in cultural festivals and events, promoting local traditions and fostering community engagement.</p>
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Health and Wellness	<p>Herbal Products: Some cooperatives focus on producing and selling herbal teas, essential oils, and natural remedies. These products often come from locally grown herbs and traditional recipes.</p> <p>Fitness and Wellness: Cooperatives may also run wellness centers through the integration of holistic health practices and promoting a healthy lifestyle.</p>
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Eco-friendly and Sustainable Businesses	<p>Natural Products: Cooperatives may produce eco-friendly products such as handmade soaps, candles, and cleaning supplies. These products often emphasize sustainability and natural ingredients.</p> <p>Recycling and Upcycling: Some cooperatives are practicing recycling and upcycling movement by turning waste materials into new products while raising awareness of environmental issues.</p>
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Women's Cooperatives and Self-Help Groups in Turkey

To build impressive economic stability, such aspiration is derived from a business model to meet social and cultural expectations. This is based on the fact that cooperatives are formed by groups and individuals that come together voluntarily to collectively address needs in their communities which are hardly met by the public and private sectors. As a result, an effective cooperative - small, medium, and large exists because of and for its members, solely focusing to meets its member's needs (Hatipoglu, 2021). In Turkey, women's cooperatives and self-help groups play a significant role in promoting economic empowerment and social development. Table 2 provides some examples of women's cooperatives and self-help groups in Turkey:

Table 2

Women's Cooperatives and Success Stories in Turkey

Cooperatives	Description and Success Stories
Kadın Emegini Değerlendirme Vakfı (KEDV)	<p>Description: KEDV supports women's cooperatives by providing training, resources, and financial aid. They focus on various sectors, including crafts, agriculture, and services.</p> <p>Success Story: KEDV has supported the establishment of over 100 women's cooperatives across Turkey. One notable success is the cooperatives in the town of Kocaeli, where women produce and sell organic food products, handicrafts, and textiles. The cooperatives have created stable employment opportunities for their members and contributed to the local economy. Through KEDV's support, the cooperatives have expanded their market reach, including participating in national fairs and selling products online.</p>
Bodrum Kadın Girişim Kooperatifi	<p>Description: Produces various food products, including olive oil, preserves, and baked goods.</p> <p>Success Story: The cooperative's focus on high-quality, locally sourced ingredients has made their products popular among both locals and tourists. They have established a successful brand and regularly participate in local markets and food festivals. The cooperatives have also partnered with local hotels and restaurants, supplying them with their products and gaining steady business. This success has empowered the women involved, providing them with financial independence and increased confidence.</p>
Bademler Women's Cooperative	<p>Description: Focuses on agriculture, particularly organic farming of vegetables, fruits, and herbs.</p> <p>Success Story: The cooperatives have successfully implemented a community-supported agriculture (CSA) program, providing fresh produce directly to consumers through subscription services. This initiative has ensured a stable income for the cooperative members and promoted sustainable farming practices in the region. The cooperatives have also collaborated with local restaurants and markets, further increasing their revenue and community impact.</p>
İzmir Kadın Girişim Üretim ve İşletme Kooperatifi	<p>Description: Produces handcrafted goods such as bags, jewelry, and home decor items.</p> <p>Success Story: This cooperative has gained recognition for its high-quality, sustainable products. They have successfully entered both local and international markets, including selling their products in boutique stores in Europe. The cooperative's emphasis on sustainable practices and locally sourced materials has resonated with environmentally conscious consumers, leading to increased sales and media attention.</p>

**Boğatepe Cheese
Women's
Cooperative**

Description: Produces traditional Kars gruyere and other dairy products.

Success Story: The cooperatives have revitalized the local dairy industry by producing high-quality, traditional cheeses. They have received training in modern cheese-making techniques while preserving their cultural heritage. Their products are now sold in specialty shops across Turkey, and the cooperatives have become a model for other dairy producers in the region. The success of these cooperatives has also attracted tourism to the village, further boosting the local economy.

**Kardelen
Women's
Cooperative**

Description: Produces organic food products like jams, honey, and dried fruits.

Success Story: The cooperatives have successfully turned Şirince into a popular tourist destination by offering authentic local experiences and products. They have preserved and promoted the village's cultural heritage while creating jobs and economic opportunities for local women. The cooperative's guesthouses and cafes are highly rated by visitors, and their handcrafted souvenirs are in high demand. This success has not only empowered the women involved but also boosted the overall economy of Şirince.

In many cases, Self-help Groups (SGHs) are not formally structured as cooperatives but play a crucial role in women's empowerment. These groups mainly focus on mutual aid, savings, and credit activities in providing women with the resources and support they need to improve their economic and social status. Both women's cooperatives and self-help groups in Turkey promote economic empowerment and foster community development through engagement in various sectors and activities.

Challenges of Women's Cooperatives in Turkey

One of the most significant factors preventing the realization of women's entrepreneurial plans is the familial obligations and responsibilities they possess. This is a fact that often perceived women as solely responsible for household chores and childcare. Such perception hinders the increase in the number of women entrepreneurs and leads to a decrease in the number of employed women (Jamaluddin et. al, 2023). Table 3 identified the challenges faced by women cooperatives in Turkey and government initiatives to help minimize the issues.

Table 3

Women's Cooperatives Challenges and Government Initiatives in Turkey

Challenges	Descriptions
Cultural Barriers	Traditional gender roles and societal expectations often limit women's participation in economic activities
Legal and Regulatory Hurdles	Complex legal procedures and bureaucratic red tape make it difficult to form and sustain cooperatives.
Financial Constraints	Limited access to capital and financial resources hampers the growth of these groups.
Government Initiatives	
Cooperatives Law Amendments	Recent amendments to cooperatives laws aim to simplify the process of forming cooperatives and provide financial incentives.
Simplified Legal Procedures	Government grants and subsidies are available to women's cooperatives for business development and capacity building.
Financial Inclusion	Various programs focus on vocational training, entrepreneurship, and cooperatives management skills.

Recommendations

Based on the study, the following recommendations can be made regarding challenges faced by women's cooperatives in Turkey:

Table 4

Recommendations to Improve Women's Cooperatives Challenges and Government Initiatives in Turkey

Initiatives	Descriptions
1. Awareness Campaigns	
Targeted Outreach	Develop campaigns specifically aimed at women entrepreneurs and rural communities to inform them about the benefits of joining or forming cooperatives. Various media channels can be used including social media, local radio, and community events, to reach a broad audience.
Success Stories	Emphasized the success of women's cooperatives to provide tangible examples of how cooperatives can positively impact members' lives. Feature these stories in promotional materials and media.
2. Simplified Legal Procedures	
2.1 Streamlined Registration Processes	Work with government agencies to simplify the registration and compliance processes for cooperatives, reducing the time and paperwork involved. Online registration systems should be implemented to make the process more accessible.

One-Stop Services	Create a centralized service hub where cooperative founders can get all the necessary information and assistance in one place, including legal advice, registration forms, and guidance on regulatory requirements.
3. Financial Inclusion	
Tailored Financial Products	Develop financial products specifically designed for women's cooperatives, such as low-interest loans, grants, and insurance products in consideration of their unique needs and challenges.
Financial Literacy Programs	Provide appropriate training to improve financial literacy and management skills among cooperative members to enhance their ability to manage finances, access funding, and plan for growth.

By focusing on these areas, the government and responsible agencies can create more supportive mechanisms for women's cooperatives in Turkey for them to succeed and thrive. Women's cooperatives and self-help groups (SHGs) in Turkey, emerged as important vehicles in spearheading women's empowerment, reflecting both the historical and contemporary socio-economic setting of the country. This initiative played a pivotal role in fostering economic independence, political participation among women, and social solidarity in allowing broader access to gender equality and sustainable development. Through women's cooperatives and SHGs, the impact is expanded within rural and urban areas that focus the area of entrepreneurship, training, upskilling, and market access. This allows women to achieve financial autonomy and contribute to household income. Politically and historically, Turkey set a record of a massive amount of women's participation in economic and social activities as well as decision-making processes at local and national levels. By nurturing leadership skills and promoting women's rights, the platform highlighted the transformative impact on women's lives and their role in advancing societal development through collective action and empowerment.

Conclusion

Women's cooperatives and SHGs are crucial for empowering women and fostering inclusive economic growth. Despite the challenges, various government initiatives in India, Turkey, Indonesia, and Malaysia have provided substantial support. Moving forward, a focus on education, market access, financial inclusion, and cultural change will be essential to enhance the effectiveness and sustainability of these collectives. Enhanced collaboration among stakeholders and tailored policy frameworks will further strengthen the capacity of women's cooperatives to drive economic and social transformation.

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