

BOOK REVIEW

SARIASLAN, KÜBRA ZEYNEP. *Empowering Housewives in Southeast Turkey*. Gender, State and Development. I.B. Tauris, London [etc.] 2023. xviii, 210 pp. £85.00. (Paper: £28.99; Open Access.)

Empowering Housewives in Southeast Turkey by Kübra Zeynep Sariaslan is a comprehensive ethnographic study that explores the workings of women's empowerment projects in the politically contested geographical area known as the "southeast" of Turkey. It is based on the Ph.D. research she conducted between 2013 and 2014 in a province named Tigris.

Sariaslan begins by describing the background to her interest in the issues surrounding the lives of women in the region vis-à-vis the historical development of the political response, including the impact of the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) and its policies on women's lives. As the author demonstrates, the political solution to women's problems in the region, primarily the violence against women (including the killing of women), has been defined across a culture-specific framework. More specifically, an underlying "gendered racism" (p. xiv) has characterized gender-mainstreaming policies in the region.

The concept of development dominates the book. It opens with the anthropology of development, starting with the initiation of the Southeast Anatolia Project (GAP) as an economic as well as human development project in 1989 as a result of cooperation between Turkish government and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). It moves on to address the workings of state-sponsored regional development initiatives in cooperation with the United Nations Development Fund. As the author notes, her research was itself funded by the Swedish Development Agency. Additionally, she provides a conceptual clarification of empowerment that is defined in terms of a capacity for critical understanding of power relations in society and an ability to make one's own decision to contest imposed structural inequalities. The introduction further discusses women as the subject of the development projects by crosscutting the impacts of feminist premises of gender-mainstreaming programmes in general with the historical trajectories of modernization politics in Turkey. Later, the author problematizes women's empowerment against the backdrop of the changing social political atmosphere in southeast Turkey in a period perceived as "the time of hope" as a result of the changing discourse towards the region and the people by the AKP government. This change fostered expectations of a peaceful solution to the armed conflict between the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) and the Turkish army that had waged for thirty years since 1984 and to the claims of a distinct identity by the Kurdish population.

Sariaslan goes on to define the issue as the ethnography of women's praxis, referring not only to the impact of empowerment projects on women but also exploring how these women navigate power structures as well as the ambiguities of

local conditions, and how they make use of the sources available to them for empowerment. The introduction, which combines the historical background of the subject with the current social and political circumstances of the research and sets the stage by providing the conceptual and theoretical debates, constitutes the densest chapter of the book. This chapter ends with a description of the methodology and ethical principles followed in the research. In this section, the author defines her study as a feminist ethnography and addresses the issues and solutions encountered in the research process relating to the anonymity of the participants, which, she claims, constitutes the most important aspect of feminist ethnography in terms of acknowledging the vulnerability of the participants.

The book comprises five chapters, providing ethnographic analysis of three aspects of women's empowerment programmes: education, employment, and political participation. Through two case studies, it also delves into top-down and bottom-up approaches to women's empowerment, gender mainstreaming, and awareness-building.

Chapter 1, titled "Second Home", examines the establishment of women's centres in the region. The author identifies first the Multipurpose Community Centres (ÇATOM), established in 1995 by the GAP Regional Development Administration (GAP RDA), and Family Support Centres (ADEM), founded by the Ministry of Family and Social Policy of the AKP government in 2012 and which replaced ÇATOMs in terms of aims and activities. However, as the author mentions, ADEMs incorporate a rather religious agenda compared to the ÇATOMs. Sariaslan shows how the women's centres provide vocational training and educational opportunities. However, they reinforce traditional gender roles rather than challenging them. To emphasize this last argument, she draws a parallel analytical criticism between these women's centres and the girls' institutes of the early Republic established in the 1920s.

Chapter 2, "Alternative Opportunities", shifts the focus to the women who navigate educational and income-generating activities in order to find ways to benefit from genuine economic independence or social mobility. However, Sariaslan criticizes state-sponsored women's centres for partly serving the creation of an informal sector where women remained stuck as piecework producers, but primarily as housewives.

"Participation Without 'Us'", the next chapter, explores the political participation of women through civil society organizations and NGOs. Sariaslan discusses the challenges women face as well as the opportunities for the ruling party to control both areas of political participation and feminist discourse. As Sariaslan demonstrates, by establishing control over political participation and of NGOs, the AKP government was able to expand its circle of effective governance into families and households.

Chapter 4, "Streaming Mainstreaming", provides an ethnography of a meeting at the local level by addressing the bureaucratic and institutional ambiguities of women's empowerment. The chapter provides a detailed account of the interactions of several actors, including formal representatives of local administrators, local UN coordinators, civil servants, NGO members, as well as informal actors, *hanımefendi*, the mayor's wife. And it questions the ideological and institutional resistance to gender equality.

The final chapter, "A Project of One's Own", presents personal narratives of two women who benefited from these empowerment projects yet chose different career

paths. The chapter underscores the agency of these women within constrained circumstances. Their stories illustrate the diverse ways in which women engage with, resist, and reinterpret empowerment initiatives.

The book provides a nuanced and comprehensive analysis of women's empowerment in southeast Turkey, grounded in rich ethnographic data. One of the book's most important contributions is the critical examination of the assumptions underlying empowerment initiatives, questioning whether they genuinely address women's needs or reinforce existing power structures. In critiquing state policies and development practices related to women's empowerment, Sariaslan argues that women's empowerment programmes define women primarily as housewives perceived within the confines of family and deny the agency of women. Nevertheless, as she shows, through praxis, women might well become both subjects and agents in empowerment initiatives. Likewise, in light of the final sentences of her Conclusion, where Sariaslan emphasizes her belief in women's ability to translate challenging circumstances into life-worth opportunities, the importance of women's praxis appears to be the key takeaway message here.

It is also important to acknowledge the limitations of this book, as they may influence the reader's understanding. One significant issue arises from the argument that state-centred policies towards women have historically aimed at rehabilitating women's social identities as housewives. In drawing a parallel between Republican modernization ideology and the ruling AKP's discourse on women, the book provides a strong argument for a historical continuity in terms of political resistance to gender equality. However, this argument needs further elaboration given that initially the "women's question" was framed in a Western-oriented and progressive discourse during the early Republican period, while the framework was provided by a religious conservative political approach. On the other hand, if there are differences between the two cases of political ideology in relation to women, where these differences manifest themselves and where similarities might be drawn could be analysed in a more refined manner.

Another problematic area relates to methodology. Sariaslan discusses her positionality at the start of the book and acknowledges her own positionality as a Western-educated woman, which is expected to influence her perspective and interactions during fieldwork. However, while her positionality is acknowledged, one might expect in a feminist ethnography more of an analysis about how her positionality is perceived in the field, the impact of her presence in the field, and the implications of her departure from the field. Except on two occasions where she speaks about her potential association with the central government and the state because of her hometown Ankara (p. 24), the capital of Turkey, and the ethical issues concerning the anonymity of the participants (p. 25), Sariaslan fails to problematize the encounters in the field and ignores the analytical explorations of feminist methodology.

Sariaslan finds another opportunity to problematize her positionality in the Conclusion, when she reflects on the aftermath of her research. Yet, her positionality is not evident in the conclusions she draws, as she acknowledges at the beginning of the study. Like Oya, a UN local coordinator, Sariaslan had left the region before the political situation changed in 2014. The adverse political and

social conditions created by the absence of peace were exacerbated by disasters such as the COVID-19 pandemic and earthquakes, as Sariaslan mentions. The women who remained in the region faced a difficult period, including armed conflict, so much so that a female tutor that Sariaslan met during her fieldwork was killed, as Oya informed her after they had left the region. Nevertheless, Sariaslan does not provide a feminist reflexive perspective on the “privilege” of leaving the field (both a research field and battlefield). It would have been beneficial if the Conclusion had included more about the author’s positionality and the anthropology of development, topics touched on in the introduction.

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