

Left behind by personal autonomy

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What are the emancipatory prospects for women excluded from salaried work? By analyzing working-class Maghrebin women's attitudes towards work, family, and heterosexuality, Fatma Çingi Kocadost shows the limits of individual emancipation through work.

Reviewed: Fatma Çingi Kocadost, *La promesse qu'on nous a faite* (The promise made to us), Paris, Éditions EHESS. 2025, 15€, p. 288.

Blending a first-person narrative with an ethnographic study of twenty young, urban, working-class women living in France as descendants of Maghrebi immigrants, Fatma Çingi Kocadost's book has two objectives. First, it seeks to present the form of life of women who share subaltern conditions, particularly as it pertains to romantic relationships, family, work, and heterosexuality. Second, it identifies and emphasizes the aporia of feminist discourses that see emancipation as exclusively tied to salaried work. These goals, which are both scholarly and political, arise from the study's ambition of being simultaneously empirical and ethical: to show how the lives of these women are configured by "overlapping relationships of subordination" while recognizing "their distinct political and ethical capacities" (p. 25).

By trying to understand the logic of the--generally unrealized--promise of a happy family made to these young women, Kocadost argues that relations of interdependence should be brought to the center of scholarly analysis and political concerns.

"Old-fashioned" intimacy

What immediately characterizes the young women considered by the study is their desire for an "old-fashioned" family life (p. 26)--that is, one organized around a strict division of labor along gendered lines, in which men engage in salaried labor to provide for the household's financial needs and women ensure the household's reproduction through domestic and parental labor. The meaning of this desire lies in a social context in which, for women with little education who are subjected to multiple processes that reduce them to minority status in public spaces and at work, the family appears as a "vital" framework that allow them to achieve the highly valued status of wife and mother (p. 27).

By the end of adolescence, "the normative horizon of matrimonial conjugality structures their entire experience of heterosexuality" (p. 49). This does not prevent the respondents, particularly the young ones, from seeing boys outside a marital framework, but these relationships remain "premarital," as the women remain systematically oriented towards a "family project" (p. 45). "Heterosexual marriage" is thus the primary marker of entry to "adulthood" (p. 71), and the concurrence of leaving the parental home, beginning a relationship, and marriage is the norm among the respondents, though only a minority of the dominant population and men from immigrant backgrounds follow the same pattern.

The experience of being single thus provides implicit evidence of heterosexual marriage's power as a norm. The more it continues, the more it is a collective problem for which the women who are the parents of the respondents are responsible. Prolonged periods of being single in one's twenties, which was common among the respondents, is acceptable only to the extent that the women express a desire to get married.

Finding a man who recognizes women's work

Among the factors that can delay when a woman gets married, Kocadost emphasizes the difficulty of finding partners who embody "protective masculinity" (p. 87). The "project of heterosexual marriage to which they are committed is strongly counterbalanced by the unemployment of [their] potential spouses" (p. 88). The

economic precarity to which young men of immigrant origin are exposed¹ leads some of the respondents to express nostalgia for "the golden age when men worked hard ... to support their families" (p. 87). Within this context emerges a hierarchy of good partners: unlike the "young people from here" (p. 89), characterized by uncertain educational and professional trajectories or by the choice to "Frenchify" oneself by pursuing upward mobility (p. 102), the young women favor *blédards*--that is, migrants who came to France as adults to find work and whose "mentality" (p. 89) aligns with their aspirations.

When beginning a relationship, most of the women have salaried jobs that they hope to leave once married. A "50-50" relationship (p. 102)--that is, being in a two-income household--is not in their interest: lacking prospects for stability and professional development at work and lacking the ability to delegate their domestic labor, they are subject to a "double workday" (p. 107). Consequently, they must identify partners who recognize "conjugal interdependence as [a] value" (p. 93). On dates, men who pay the check and offer gifts are decisive signs. They make it possible to avoid "cheapskates" (p. 90) and find a partner with whom an equitable arrangement can be negotiated, in which the man's financial support for the household functions as compensation for women's domestic and parental labor.

Yet Kocadost notes that defending interdependence between partners in a world in which relations of dependence are seen as "illegitimate, and even shameful and degrading ... is a challenge" (p. 128). Concerned that they might be seen as "kept" by middle class and upper middle class white women or as "gold diggers" by men in their milieu (including their husbands), they go out of their way to ensure that "the value of the work that they do conscientiously " is recognized (p. 128). For many couples, the discrepancy between "the idealized conjugal model and the reality of spousal relations" (p. 190) often results in divorce, even when the couple engages in "conjugal care."² It is in such cases that other forms of interdependence prove crucial: family solidarity, where it exists, particularly with female family members, often mitigates the precarity that follows separation.³

¹ Yaël Brinbaum and Jean-Luc Primon, "Transition professionnelle et emploi des descendants d'immigrés en France," *Revue européenne des sciences sociales*, 511.1 (2013), pp. 33–63, doi:10.4000/ress.2338.

² Irène Jonas, "Un nouveau travail de 'care' conjugal: la femme 'thérapeute' du couple," *Recherches familiales*, 3.1 (2006), pp. 38–46, doi:10.3917/rf.003.0038.

³ Céline Bessière and Sibylle Gollac, *Le Genre Du Capital: Comment La Famille Reproduit Les Inégalités*, Collection L'envers Des Faits (La Découverte, 2019).

Becoming and remaining a mother

If the women Kocadost interviewed are so eager to subscribe to the model of heterosexual marriage, it is because it is the only legitimate framework in which they can become mothers (p. 133). As they approach thirty, they are motivated less by the imperative of getting married than by the desire and injunctions to become mothers. Moreover, when separation occurs, the children born of these relationships are often seen retrospectively as the main and sometimes only benefit from the marriage experience.

Once they have become mothers, the respondents mostly withdraw from salaried work, at least temporarily, to devote themselves to parental labor. If maternity is a better life option than salaried work--which is often precarious and poorly paid--the women justify their choice primarily by citing the difficulty of "juggling the two" (p. 135). To be a mother "100%" of the time (p. 135) is a way of distinguishing oneself from "careerist" women (p. 165), but also and especially a means of preventing their children from "taking a wrong turn" (p. 177). Much of a mother's work consists in providing their children with favorable life conditions and offsetting the obstacles and the discrimination they encounter at school and in public spaces. Kocadost also notes the inequalities in the reproductive labor undertaken by women depending on their social origins: not only do they lack resources, but their children are unlikely to achieve a valued social status and position. This inequality manifests itself in the mothers' exhaustion, as they try to "hold out" (p. 183) despite the lack of recognition for their work and their limited ability to impact the lives of their children.

Struggles within domination

Over the course of her book, which blends scholarly analysis, political critique, and personal narrative, Kocadost traces a demanding path: attempting a "reconstruction from below" (p. 118) of the practices, motives, and expectations of working-class Maghrebin women while showing that the latter are more than just adaptations to relations of subordination. Though the women's form of life is defined by "the limited parameters of domination" (p. 239), Kocadost brings to light the meaning and the ethical and political implications of their actions.

Indeed, "the fact that the heteropatriarchy's socio-economic structures channel women towards family life should not make us forget that women seek to live within it as comfortably as possible" (p. 75). The meaning of family for the respondents can only be understood if one recalls the combined experience of recent migratory experience and racial marginalization. By comparing the discourse of these women with the autobiographical narrative of the writer Kaoutar Harchi,⁴ Kocadost emphasizes the role played by the family in the constitution of a "home" in a hostile world, and wonders: "Is it possible to build a home in a foreign land without a family?" (p. 186).

Though the book does not provide a definitive answer, it emphasizes that it is not so much the heterosexual family as relations of interdependence that supports the respondents form of life. This is evident particularly after breakups, when women's lives are reorganized around female sociability and solidarity. Drawing on their experiences, Kocadost appeals to feminist movements, who, in her view, should start "thinking from the standpoint of these women's lives, in which interdependence rather than individual independence is sought" (p. 257). This new perspective is all the more necessary in that the personal autonomy to which some privileged women accede is generally based on the delegation of care work to women in subaltern positions, in relations of interdependence that have been rendered invisible (p. 255).

Interdependence vs. personal autonomy?

The book's rich material, subtle analyses, and the author's situated standpoint shed new light on the relationship between work and family life of working-class women who have been racialized as "Maghrebin." Though Kocadost is successful at reconstructing the political depth of their practices, it is a shame that the politicization of these women is not given a more central place. The transcripts of the interviews show that the respondents formulate critiques of gender relationships, racism, and the state, without suggesting the conditions that shape these processes of politicization. Furthermore, the recurrent opposition between the model of "female autarky" (p. 255), associated with upper class white women, and the interdependence model embraced by the respondents makes it difficult to consider life trajectories that borrow from both models. The case of descendants of immigrants experiencing upward mobility is

⁴ Kaoutar Harchi, *Comme Nous Existons: Récit*, Domaine Français, first edition (Actes sud, 2021).

particularly instructive: while they achieve a degree of personal autonomy through the acquisition of economic and cultural (as well as political) capital, they generally do not "abandon" their original milieu and are engaged daily in relationships based on solidarity.⁵ Focusing on their life experiences makes it possible to consider the complex relationship between autonomy and interdependence.

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⁵ Shirin Shahrokni, *Higher Education and Social Mobility in France: Challenges and Possibilities among Descendants of North African Immigrants*, Studies in Migration and Diaspora (Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2021).