





Examining the Health Experiences of Women Working in Flexible Production During the Pandemic Process: A Qualitative Study *

Pandemi Sürecinde Esnek Üretimde Çalışan Kadınların Sağlık Deneyimlerinin İncelenmesi: Nitel Bir Çalışma

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Abstract

Objective: This study examine the health status of women in the flexible production process during the pandemic period.

Material and Method: In this study, the qualitative research method was preferred. Maximum variation, sampling method, was used to determine the study group. The data were collected using a semi-structured interview form with the in-depth interview technique and the interviews lasted for 15-20 minutes. Content analysis was used in the research. The study was carried out with 15 people until data repetition occurred.

Results: In the research, the category was determined and the categories are as follows: Changes in women's working life before and after the pandemic, economic problems during remote working, housework during the pandemic, being affected by the care of the elderly and children, the barriers of being a woman in business life during the pandemic and gender equality in business life before and after the pandemic.

Conclusion and Recommendations: It has been determined that women pay attention to protection measures during the pandemic period. It was found that women were tired and stressed due to housework and childcare, lost income due to full closure during the pandemic period, exposed to double standards in their workplaces. It is recommended that future research, including men, compare perceptions during the pandemic.

Keywords: Pandemic, qualitative study, remote working, woman

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Öz

Amaç: Bu çalışma da pandemi döneminde esnek üretim sürecinde ki kadınların sağlık durumları incelenmiştir.

Gereç ve Yöntem: Bu araştırmada nitel araştırma yönteminin tercih edilmiştir. Çalışma grubunun belirlenmesi için maksimum çeşitlilik örnekleme yöntemi kullanılmıştır. Veriler, derinlemesine görüşme tekniğiyle yarı yapılandırılmış görüşme formu kullanılarak toplanmış ve görüşmeler 15-20 dakika sürmüştür. Araştırmada içerik analizi kullanılmıştır. Çalışma, veri tekrarı oluşuncaya kadar 15 kişi ile yürütülmüştür.

Bulgular: Araştırmada kategori belirlenmiş olup kategoriler şu şekildedir: Pandemi öncesi ve sonrası kadınların çalışma hayatındaki değişimler, evden çalışma süresince ekonomik olarak yaşanan sorunlar, pandemi döneminde ev işleri, yaşlı ve çocuk bakımından etkilenme, pandemi döneminde kadın olmanın iş hayatındaki engelleri ve pandemi öncesi ve sonrası dönemde iş hayatında cinsiyet eşitliğidir.

Sonuç ve Öneriler: Kadınların pandemi döneminde korunma önlemine dikkat ettikleri, ev işleri, çocuk bakımına bağlı olarak yoruldukları ve stres yaşadıkları, pandemi döneminde tam kapanmaya bağlı olarak gelir kaybı yaşadıkları, iş yerlerinde çifte standarda maruz kaldıkları bulunmuştur. Gelecekte planlanan araştırmaların erkekleri de kapsayarak pandemi sırasındaki algıları karşılaştırması önerilmektedir

Anahtar Kelimeler: Pandemi, nitel araştırma, uzaktan çalışma, kadın

INTRODUCTION

COVID-19 has not only been a health problem, but also has had significant effects on social life. Plan International stated that the pandemic has disrupted the lives of individuals and put people, families and communities under health and economic pressure (Plan International, 2021). The pandemic, which has significant effects on individuals, is likely to affect disadvantaged groups more. The impact of the pandemic on women, who are among the disadvantaged groups, is inevitable. However, no government health organization has made any predictions about the gender analysis of the epidemic or the group that will potentially be affected during the preparation phase in this regard (Wenham et al., 2020).

Individuals whose living standards have changed due to the pandemic are primarily affected economically. The pandemic has especially affected people who work in jobs that do not have the opportunity to work remotely. It has been found that women who do not have the opportunity to work remotely during the pandemic period are more likely to be unemployed than men (Reichelt et al., 2020). In addition, it has been determined that women quit their jobs more than men in the later stages of the pandemic (Zamarro et al., 2020).

The pandemic has socio-economic effects as well as economic effects on women. The low socio-economic status of women leads to a decrease in educational success. The effects of social events such as poverty and poor health services are inevitable. In this case, it indirectly affects the child and family life (American Psychological Association, 2020). It has been stated that the stress levels of women increase due to the source of children and spouses of the pandemic process during the pandemic period (Başaran & Aksoy, 2020). In addition, it was found that one-fifth of women were unhappy due to staying at home, and nearly half (53%) argued with their spouses (Göl-Güven et al., 2020).

The pandemic also has significant effects on women's health. It is stated that mandatory quarantine practices cause negative psychological effects such as stress and anger (Brooks et al., 2020). For this reason, quarantine practices increase the risk of gender-based violence and domestic abuse, as in previous epidemics (Chynoweth et al., 2018). In a study conducted with adults regarding sexual health, it was reported that 22% of the participants had a decrease in sexual desire during the pandemic period, 41% of the participants had a decrease in the frequency of sexual intercourse, and about one third of the participants (31%) had impaired partner relations during the pandemic. It can be thought that the fact that this epidemic is larger than other epidemics may cause an increase in the problems experienced by women (Li et al., 2020).

The working life, social life and health conditions of women have undergone significant changes during the pandemic period. The United Nations stated that the crisis caused by the pandemic is not only a health-related problem, but also needs to be examined in terms of human rights (United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner, 2021). In this study, which is planned from this point of view, it is aimed to determine the causes of the problems by conducting in-depth interviews about the working order, social life and health status of women who switched to flexible production.

Research Question

1. What is the effect of flexible production on women's health during the pandemic period?

MATERIAL AND METHOD

The Aim and Type of the Study: Qualitative research method is used in this study since it provides a closer and in-depth understanding of experiences rather than generalizing the results to the universe (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2018). This method is preferred because it is thought to provide various comments and rich content with the perspective of many women in accordance with the subject of the study.

The Targeted Population and Sample of the Study: Turkey consists of different provinces with populations ranging from millions to thousands. In order to determine what the women who worked flexibly during the pandemic period in different provinces of Turkey experienced, participants were selected from provinces with different population distribution in certain areas Turkey. Considering the social isolation rules due to the pandemic, the interviews were made via mobile phones because it was not appropriate to meet with women face to face. The study group of the research was made up of women who worked flexibly due to the pandemic in different regions of Turkey between 01 May and 30 October 2021. The sample to be interviewed was reached by snowball sampling method. The study started with a woman from the researcher's environment. After that, "Who do you suggest we talk to about this?" The question was asked to the woman and a working group was formed by reaching other women (Patton, 1990). In qualitative research, "saturation" is an important guide in deciding the sample size (Saunders et al., 2018). 15 people participated in the research. One person did not agree to participate in the study because the recording was to be taken over the phone.

Data Collection Tools: Semi-structured interview was used as data collection tool in this research. A literature review was conducted to develop the semi-structured interview style (Kalateh Sadati et al., 2020; Pasay-an, 2020; Zohreh et al., 2020). The semi-structured interview form consisting of five items was prepared based on these studies. While preparing the form in the study, care was taken to ensure that the questions were simple and easy to understand. Before starting the research, the participants were informed about the research. The purpose of the research was explained to the participants.

Data Collection: The deficiencies of the interview form were eliminated according to the feedback obtained by asking a public health nursing specialist in order to ensure the validity of the interview forms in terms of comprehensibility and adequacy. In addition to the interview form questions, questions such as "why, how, exactly what did you mean, explain" were included in order to understand the thoughts of the participants clearly. The second author (Male) who conducted the research will be interviewed with the participants and the interview form will be shown and it will be stated that their identity information will be kept confidential. The author, who collected the data of the research, has a bachelor's degree in business administration and continues his master's degree in the same field, and carries out qualitative research in his master's thesis. The appropriate times for the participants were determined in the study taking into account the principle of voluntariness. The interviews were tape-recorded with the permission of the participants. In addition, an environment in which the participant could respond comfortably was preferred, and the interviews lasted for 15-20 minutes. No one other than the participant and the interviewer took part in the collection of data in the study. The interviews were transcribed into text and codes and categories were determined.

After the purpose and importance of the study was explained to the researcher, the interview was started. Interviewing the interviewees on the phone made it easier for individuals living in different provinces to participate in the research. This provided significant convenience for the interviewer. As a pilot study, three people were interviewed and the interviewees were not included in the study. The data of the study were deciphered by four researchers.

The interview questions of the study are as follows: Has there been a change in your working life before and after the pandemic? If yes, can you explain this change? Did you experience any financial difficulties while working remotely? Can you explain this change? How were you affected in housework, elderly and child care during the pandemic period? Is your gender an obstacle in your business life during the pandemic period? Can you talk about it? Do you think that you have equal conditions with men when entering business life before and after the pandemic? Can you talk about it?

Data Assessment: Data collection and analysis were carried out simultaneously in the study. Data were analyzed using the content analysis approach of Graneheim and Lundman. First, the interviews were transcribed. Transcripts were sent back to the participants and their information was confirmed. After listening to the interviews, the transcripts were read several times to get a general idea of the content. Units in the analysis consist of speeches of transcripts containing words, sentences and paragraphs. Semantic units are groups of words or sentences that have the same meaning or are related in some ways to the same concept. According to this situation, the semantic units were condensed and coded. The codes were compared with each other and divided into more abstract categories according to their similarities. Finally, the categories were compared with each other and divided into higher categories (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004).

After the research data were written down, all interviews were read by the researchers to get an idea about the general content of the text. The text in each content is divided into units in meaning. Each unit consists of many words, sentences or paragraphs whose content and context are interconnected. Units with similar meanings are coded and labeled. By interpreting the codes, differences and similarities were compared and five categories were obtained. Finally, by combining the categories, the theme "Effects of flexible production on women's health during the pandemic period" was determined.

Some studies have been carried out to control the factors that will affect the validity and reliability of the study. The opinions of the expert were taken into account in the preparation of the interview form in order to ensure the internal validity of the study. Questions such as clarity and suitability were examined and necessary corrections were made in line with expert opinions. The reason for choosing the method used, the study group, and the application process of the study, the data collection tool and the analysis process were explained in detail to ensure the external validity of the study. The internal reliability of the study was increased by directly including the participants' views on the findings and using the recording device. Finally, the consistency of the conclusion and findings section was discussed by the researchers and a consensus was reached. In this way, the external reliability of the research was tried to be increased.

Ethical Considerations: Ethics committee approval was obtained from Erciyes University Social and Human Sciences Ethics Committee (No: 208) and written permission was obtained from the hospital where the study was conducted.

Limitation of the Study: The study has some limitations. The research was conducted on a relatively small sample of 15 women working in different branches. Based on the results of the research, conducting quantitative studies with a large sample will make it possible to generalize the findings. Only women's perceptions are included in this study. In addition, the women included in the study were interviewed only once. Future research could compare the perceptions of men and women during the pandemic by including the men in the sample.

RESULTS

In this section, categories were created according to the answers obtained from the questions asked to the participants. Table 1 shows the findings regarding flexible working women during the pandemic period. The theme of “effects of flexible production on women's health during the pandemic period” was created regarding the question as “What is the effect of flexible production on women's health during the pandemic period?” Table 1 shows the socio-demographic data of the participants.

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of women

Participants	Occupation	City	Current working status	Age
P-1	Employee at an accounting office	Muđla	Flexible Employee	28
P-2	Shop assistant	Denizli	Unemployed	32
P-3	Healthcare personnel	Burdur	Flexible Employee	24
P-4	Employee at an accounting office	Antalya	Flexible Employee	26
P-5	Employee at a VIP transfer company	Muđla	Unemployed	28
P-6	Private company staff, secretary	İzmir	Unemployed	25
P-7	Employee at a private company finance unit	Burdur	Flexible Employee	26
P-8	Shop assistant	İzmir	Unemployed	28
P-9	Waiter	Muđla	Unemployed	25
P-10	Employee at a paper company	Isparta	Flexible Employee	32
P-11	Employee at an accounting office	Denizli	Flexible Employee	25
P-12	Employee at an accounting firm	İzmir	Flexible Employee	27
P-13	Employee at an accounting office	Antalya	Flexible Employee	30
P-14	Employee at a cafe	Antalya	Unemployed	24
P-15	Security officer	Antalya	Flexible Employee	33

Table 2 shows the findings regarding the questions asked to women.

Table 2. The effects of flexible production on women's health during the pandemic period

Theme	Category	Code	N
Effects of flexible production on women's health during the pandemic period	Changes in the working life of women before and after the pandemic	Distance	12
		Attention	8
		Cleaning	8
	Economic problems during remote working	Mask	5
		Tiredness	4
		Loss of income	9
		Inability to meet needs	2
		Fatigue	6
	Being affected by housework, elderly and child care during the pandemic period	Being stressed	4
		Uneasiness	2
		Uncertainty	1
	Obstacles in business life of being a woman during the pandemic period	Be considered as weak	3
		Be considered as insufficient	2
		Double standard	3
	Gender equality in business life before and after the pandemic	A psychological war	2

Changes in women's working life before and after the pandemic: The majority of the participants stated that they attach importance to the rules of distance, attention and cleanliness in this category, which was created to determine the changes in the working life of women before and after the pandemic. They also stated that they were tired due to the difficult working conditions. For example, P-10 stated the following: “Our workload has increased tremendously due to our more active work in the field. Wearing a mask is very important for our health; I don't know how to express it. Because of the crowded environments I work in, it is very important for us to wear masks for our health; because my mom, dad, brother, brother and grandpa have had COVID-19, so I'm being extremely meticulous. I couldn't even eat outside due to hygiene. This pandemic process pushed me to stay away from people”. In this statement, P-10 has declared the care it shows in distance, attention and cleanliness in order to prevent disease.

According to the findings obtained from the interview, some of the women stated that they took care to use masks to protect themselves from the disease and to protect the people around them. P-7 explained her thoughts on this subject with the following sentence: “I tried to be more careful, especially about the mask in order not to put my family at risk”. P-11 stated that “My family even got fined twice for not wearing masks. However, I wear two masks even at home; because I have chronic asthma and I'm afraid that if I get sick, I won't be able to get over it. I strive for everyone to wear it, be it at work or at home...” From this point of view, it is seen that the participants give more importance to the prevention measures in order to be protected from the epidemic.

Some participants stated that they experienced fatigue due to the increase in work intensity during the pandemic period. In this context, P-8 explained her thought with the following words: "Working alone and having a busy schedule made it hard for me. It was very difficult for me to recover my work, especially after COVID-19". P-15 stated that "I can say that the tightening of our guards and the fact that we stay overtime cause me to experience both psychological and physical fatigue. I can say that people's insensitivity and not caring as if there is no disease makes my work more difficult".

Economic problems during working from home: The category of "economic problems experienced during working from home" was created regarding the question of "Did you experience any financial difficulties while working from home? If so, can you overcome these difficulties?". "Loss of income and inability to meet needs" codes were created under this category.

In this category, which was created to determine the economic problems women experience during working from home, nearly half of the participants said that they experienced loss of income. P-12 stated that "I have experienced payment delays at certain times in paying my bank loans. This situation caused me to experience great financial losses, and for this reason, it was very difficult for me to pay my bills in some periods, especially in a two-month period. The delay in paying my loans triggered them all". In addition, some of the participants stated that they had problems in meeting their daily needs. P-6 explained her opinion in this direction with the following words: "During the pandemic, I experienced financial difficulties, inability to meet needs, future anxiety and family problems". P-1 stated that "We had a lot of difficulties because my family members did not work. When the end of the month came, it became difficult to pay expenses such as bills.... Instead of unnecessary expenses, I tried to meet our basic food and needs as much as possible." From this point of view, it is seen that the participants experienced serious economic problems during the pandemic period.

Being affected by housework, elderly care and child care during the pandemic period: The category of "influenced by housework, elderly care and child care during the pandemic period" was created related with the question of "How were you affected by housework, elderly care and child care during the pandemic?" "Tiredness, being stressed, unhappiness and uncertainty" codes were created under this category.

Approximately one third of the participants stated that they were tired and stressed due to housework, care for the elderly and children during the pandemic period. In this context, P-4 explained her thought with the following sentence: "It is, of course, tiring and stressful psychologically compared to pre-pandemic." Some participants stated that they were unhappy with this situation. P-13 expressed her opinion on this matter as follows: "...I can say that being at home and having my brother at home negatively affects my motivation to work. I can say that this situation both caused my brother to have difficulties in terms of school and also caused me to have difficulties in my work environment". From this point of view, it is seen that the participants were affected both physically and psychologically during the pandemic period. One participant in the study (P-2) stated that she had an uncertain mood during the pandemic period.

Barriers of being a woman in business life during the pandemic period: The category of "Barriers of being a woman in business life during the pandemic period" was created related with the question of "Is your gender an obstacle in your business life during the pandemic period? If this has been an obstacle, can you explain?" Some of the participants reported that they were weak and inadequate in business life compared to men. In this context, P-5 explained her thoughts as follows: "...Since men think they created the world, I'm talking about the majority, they always see women as weak". P-14 said that: "The fact that our male personnel think that women are insufficient to do heavy work is psychologically wearing out on me, that

is, on us; I can say that there is psychological pressure from this aspect". One participant in the study (P-3) stated that she felt inadequate compared to physically stronger individuals. P-3 explained her thoughts on this subject with the following words: "Sometimes I feel inadequate in front of bulky people".

Gender equality in business life before and after the pandemic: The category of "Gender equality in business life before and after the pandemic" was created related with the question of "Do you think you have equal conditions with men in business life before and after the pandemic? If you do, can you explain?" Codes of "psychological warfare, reluctance and double standards" were created under this category. Some of the participants were exposed to double standards against men. In this context, P-6 said that "First of all, the dismissals are aimed at women, and it will continue like this today and tomorrow. The thought of being equal to men is not even possible and this will always continue as a double standard". P-9 stated that "Our workload in discrimination against women has increased even more. We feel fatigued". One participant in the study (P-2) stated that they had a psychological war against their jobs during the pandemic period in their business life. P-2 expressed her opinion in the following words: "Although there is not much difference in terms of working conditions, we are definitely not equal in a psychological war like questioning the place of women in our profession" From this point of view, it is seen that women experience physical and psychological problems in business life compared to men.

DISCUSSION

This study examines the impact of flexible working on women's health during the COVID-19 quarantine. With the onset of the pandemic, women started flexible working hours. In flexible working hours, they had to carry out some of their work at work and some at home. This situation has negatively affected women physically and psychologically, as women who stay at home for a long time undertake housework and childcare. In a study investigating the problems experienced by women working from home, nearly half of the women stated that working at home is more difficult than working in the office (Kaur & Sharma, 2020).

The COVID-19 pandemic continues to affect the flow of family and business life in Turkey and around the world, affecting women's health due to the working from home process, their remote working and their roles at home. The curfew of individuals not only restricts people's workplaces, but also disrupts their social lives. This means that people live in "social boxes".

People have developed various methods to cope with traumatic events such as diseases and natural disasters (Huang et al., 2020). It was determined that women pay attention to social distance to cope with the epidemic, and they try to cope with the epidemic by using masks and following hygiene rules in this study. The prevention strategies developed by the participants are compatible with the strategies of WHO. This shows that the participants acted in accordance with the rules regarding the epidemic.

The increase in the domestic burden of women and the continuation of remote work life have brought women face to face with various problems. One of the problems women face during the pandemic period is stressful and tiring work conditions. Similar to the findings of our study, it has been reported that health workers are stressed and overworked in studies conducted in China and the USA (Hammonds et al., 2020; Wu et al., 2020; Xiao et al., 2020). Unlike this study, it was determined that women's stress and anxiety levels were low in another study on female employees (Tan et al., 2021). In a study conducted in Italy, it was emphasized that women spend more time on housework and childcare than their spouses during the pandemic period, their spouses spend more time at home, and there is no redistribution in housework (Boca et al., 2021). In a study conducted in Germany, it was reported that changing working conditions and increasing housework during the pandemic period reduced the welfare level of

women and men, but there was no more significant decrease in women (Vicari et al., 2022). The high level of stress and fatigue among working women is related to the clear distinction of gender typing of work roles of men and women as gender roles in Turkish family culture. Even in modern urban families, there is no reduction in traditional domestic expectations of women's employment, whatever the job (Sunar & Fişek, 2005). It is thought that our research findings are due to the cultural problems imposed on women.

Similarly, it is seen in our research findings that the income losses of women have decreased with the pandemic. Women are more likely to be unemployed due to the pandemic. Women participating in the study stated that loss of income is a big problem for them. This problem is more common in developing countries. One of the reasons for this problem is that the economies of developing countries have been hampered by service sector travel restrictions. Second, the proportion of women who can work from home is higher in low-income countries. Therefore, women cannot work from their homes. Third, women in developing countries work in the shadow sector. Finally, as developing countries have less access to technology, they may lose their jobs (World Trade Organization, 2020). In another study on women, it was determined that in the later stages of the pandemic, women took more leave than men or quit their job in another way; this study also supports this situation (Zamarro et al., 2020). In a study conducted during the pandemic period, it was stated that women experienced loss of income (Ray et al., 2021). This is thought to be due to the limited working conditions of women.

It was determined in this study that women faced double standards and privileges at work before and during the pandemic. In a study conducted during the pandemic period, it was determined that women lost more jobs than men related to dismissal or remote work (Blundell et al., 2020). In addition, women have problems in terms of promotion, they need to combine their careers with family care responsibilities (Conley & Jenkins, 2011; Moreau et al., 2008). In a different study, it was emphasized that women spend more time on housework (Bosman, 2021). It is thought that women experience various problems in business life due being in the disadvantaged group and socially loaded family roles.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The effect of flexible production on women's health during the pandemic period has been examined in this article. During the pandemic period, women paid attention to mask, distance and hygiene rules, and they lost their income due to the transition to remote working. In addition, they experienced stress due to staying at home for a long time and experienced fatigue due to housework. As in the pre-pandemic period, women were exposed to double standards at work after the pandemic. It is recommended that future research, including men, compare perceptions during the pandemic.

Ethical Considerations: Ethics committee approval was obtained from Erciyes University Social and Human Sciences Ethics Committee (No: 208) and written permission was obtained from the hospital where the study was conducted.

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