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## Investigation of Solid Waste Collectors with Economic and Social Dimensions

*Katı Atık Toplayıcıların Ekonomik ve Toplumsal Boyutlarıyla İncelenmesi*

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### Abstract

*Solid waste collectors play a key role in collecting domestic waste and recycling it. The negativities in the working environment and conditions of those who try to make a living by collecting solid waste affect their position in the social context. For this reason, in this study, the waste collection experiences of the actors in the solid waste collection sector were discussed. The economic and social disadvantages associated with their work were tried to be understood. In this qualitative study, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 20 participants (one of whom owns a waste sorting facility and two of whom are facility employees) who make a living by collecting solid waste in Ordu, Turkey. The sampling of the interviews was determined by sequential sampling. But there were also those who were determined by a little snowball sampling. The data collected through interviews were analyzed using descriptive and content analysis techniques. The findings of the study revealed the experiences of solid waste collectors and the challenges they face in the sector with their economic and social dimensions. In this way, ideas were obtained about the working conditions of solid waste collectors and their place in working life, migration experiences, poverty levels and stigma situations. It also allows policymakers to gain insight into improvements to waste collectors' working conditions and social status.*

**Keywords:** Solid waste, solid waste collectors, social change, migration, poverty, disadvantage, recycling.

### Öz

Katı atık toplayıcıları, evsel atıkların toplanması ve bunların geri dönüşüme kazandırılmasında kilit rol oynar. Katı atık toplayarak geçimlerini sağlamaya çalışanların çalışma ortamı ve koşullarındaki olumsuzluklar sosyal bağlamdaki konumlarını da etkiler. Bu nedenle bu çalışmada katı atık toplama sektöründeki aktörlerin atık toplama deneyimleri ele alındı. Onların yaptıkları iş ile ilgili ekonomik ve sosyal dezavantajlıklar anlaşılmaya çalışıldı. Bu nitel çalışmada, Türkiye'nin Ordu şehrinde katı atık toplayarak geçimini sağlayan (biri atık ayrıştırma tesisi sahibi ikisi tesis çalışanı olan) 20 katılımcı ile yarı yapılandırılmış görüşmeler gerçekleştirildi. Gerçekleştirilen görüşmelerin örnekleme, ardışık örnekleme ile belirlendi. Fakat az da olsa kartopu örnekleme ile belirlenenler de oldu. Görüşmeler yoluyla toplanan veriler, betimsel ve içerik analizi teknikleri kullanılarak analiz edildi.

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Çalışmanın bulguları, katı atık toplayıcılarının deneyimleri ve sektörde karşılaştıkları zorlukları ekonomik ve sosyal boyutlarıyla ortaya koydu. Böylece, katı atık toplayıcıların çalışma koşulları ve çalışma hayatındaki yerleri, göç deneyimleri, yoksulluk seviyeleri ve damgalanma durumları hakkında fikirler edinildi. Ayrıca bu çalışma, politika yapıcılara atık toplayıcıların çalışma koşullarına ve sosyal statülerine ilişkin iyileştirilmeler konusunda içgörü edinmelerine olanak sağlar.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Katı atık, katı atık toplayıcıları, toplumsal değişme, göç, yoksulluk, dezavantajlılık, geri dönüşüm.

## Introduction

The excessive consumption seen recently in today's societies and the efforts to bring all kinds of waste generated from this consumption to the market by re-refining them on the axis of capitalist values have brought many changes in many modern areas society offers to humanity. The area where this change is seen concerns the whole world and is associated with environmental problems. Combined with human sensitivities, which emerge in the relationship between production and consumption, has been recycling. Naturally, then, recycling has become a robust sector not only for modern societies but also for backward societies and has become the focus of attention of many segments of society. Solid waste collectors, one of these segments and at the lowest step of the recycling sector, work under challenging conditions, especially informal labor. The number of those who make a living working in this way is increasing daily.

Subsistence is a concept that includes people's abilities and means of living, including their food, income, and wealth (Chambers & Conway, 1992: 1). The concept of subsistence strategies refers to a series of adjustments made by households in response to internal and external factors in order to survive at the same level or achieve upward mobility (Lingman, 2005: 16). In subsistence strategy analysis, individuals are seen as productive and active actors, not passive. However, the strategies developed by individuals are not independent of the resources and structural conditions they possess (Güneş, 2010; Didero, 2012). Solid waste collection is one of the effective tools that individuals use to overcome the daily economic difficulties they experience. Although they seem to be free to choose this job, their inclusion in the informal economy has to do with the resources they have and structural problems.

Fragmentation in the labor market leads to the marginalization of certain groups in society (Castles & Miller, 2008: 282). In other words, some segments of society may face disadvantageous situations such as poverty, discrimination and stigma. When the studies focusing on solid waste collectors in Turkey are examined, the legal dimensions of garbage and recycling (Kılınç, 2014), the working and exclusion status of recycling workers from the perspective of university students (Çeken, 2017), the problems experienced by waste collectors in the axis of urban poverty (Özsoy, 2012), psychosocial reflections on urban poverty experiences (Güngördü & Özgen, 2021), their contribution to recovery policies and social inclusion (Ekşi, 2017). Apart from these, studies conducted in different countries have shown the poverty levels of solid waste collectors (Hayami et al., 2006), class struggle (Campbell, 2018), the changing situations of actors with the collection of waste by multinational companies (Didero, 2012) and their working conditions in unsafe and unsanitary conditions (Cointreau, 2006; Bunn et al., 2011; Mol et al., 2019; Lissah et al., 2020). However, in the literature review, it is seen that especially in

Turkey, the field studies that deal with the waste collection experiences of solid waste collectors and the determinants of economic (working conditions) and social conditions (such as migration, poverty, stigmatization) that affect these experiences are at a very limited level. In this context, this study aims to understand and interpret the waste collection experiences of solid waste collectors by considering the gap in the literature. The main questions sought to be answered in the research are:

- 1) How do solid waste collectors understand the economic expectations for the work they do, and how do they make sense of the economic expectations they perceive about the work they do?
- 2) What societal situations influence waste collection experiences? Do they experience processes of being labelled, such as being stigmatized by positive or negative reviews?

### ***A Contextual problematic of modernity and underdevelopment: Waste production and management***

Problem of waste is a problem in underdeveloped societies as well as in developed modern societies. The increase in consumption and the encompassing of every area of social life have brought this problem to universal dimensions and made waste management necessary. According to the World Bank, solid waste management, a universal problem, affects everyone globally. Governments and individuals make consumption and waste management decisions that affect communities' daily health, productivity, and cleanliness. If the decisions taken are not effective, the wastes cause pollution of the world's oceans, clogging of sewers and floods. Additionally, it has negative impacts such as transmitting diseases via vector breeding; the burning of waste also causes respiratory problems through airborne particles, harms animals that consume it unknowingly, and affects economic development through diminished tourism (Kaza et al., 2018: 1).

As a result of the consumer society, today's unprecedented waste is not a result of some organic processes related to human nature but primarily a result of the level of well-being and, therefore, consumption habits. For this reason, societies and individuals with high-income levels produce more wastes that depend on the human decision (Kılınç, 2014: 470). Worldwide, 2.01 billion tons of household solid waste are generated annually. With the increasing population and consumption worldwide, this figure is expected to reach 2.59 billion tons by 2030 and 3.4 billion tons by 2050. Many of these wastes are produced by developed countries that we can call modern. Although they make up only 16 percent of the world's population, high-income countries have 34 percent of the world's waste, or in other words, 683 million tons.

In contrast, low-income countries, which comprise 9 percent of the world's population, produce only about 5 percent, or 93 million tons, of global waste. Three high-income countries in the North American region (Bermuda, Canada, and the United States) produce the highest average amount of waste per capita at 2.21 kilograms daily. The three areas, highly populated by low- and middle-income nations, make the lowest amount of waste per capita. The average daily waste produced by these regions is 0.46 kilograms in Sub-Saharan Africa, 0.52 kilograms in South Asia, and 0.56 kilograms in East Asia and the Pacific. Overall, the estimated global average for 2016 is estimated at 0.74 kilograms of solid waste production per person per day. Average waste production between countries varies considerably, from



0.11 kilograms per person per day to 4.54 kilograms. Waste generation has a generally positive relationship with economic development. With increasing income changes, waste generation has increased faster than generally at lower income levels (Kaza et al., 2018: 20).

In Turkey, according to the calculations of the Turkish Statistical Institute, a total of 104.8 million tons of waste, including 30.9 million tons of hazardous waste, was generated in manufacturing industry establishments, mining enterprises, thermal power plants, organized industrial zones (OIZ), health institutions and households in 2020. Compared to 2018, it is stated that the total amount of waste has increased by 10.5 percent. Again, according to TURKSTAT, waste services are provided in 1,387 of the entire 1,389 municipalities, 69.4 percent of the 32.3 million tons of waste collected in the municipalities where waste service is provided are sent to landfill facilities, 17 percent to municipal landfills, and 13.2 percent to recovery plants. In contrast, 0.4 percent is disposed of by burning in the open, buried, or poured into a stream or land. As a result, the average daily amount of waste collected in the municipalities was 1.13 kg (TURKSTAT, 2021).

Countries' waste management situations also evolve as they move from low-income to middle- and high-income levels. Increased prosperity and urbanization are related to an increase in waste generation per capita (Kaza et al., 2018: 1). Definitions of waste and definitions of domestic solid waste (MSW) differ in different countries. For example, among developed countries, domestic solid waste (MSW) defines all goods defined as used goods that still have economic value among developing countries. In developed countries, eliminating used electronic appliances, furniture and fixtures, newspapers, magazines, and clothing causes the cost of disposal. For this reason, these goods are described as waste in developed countries because they cause problems and require more processing. Conversely, in developing countries, these are considered valuable goods and can still be used after being repaired or their components have been recovered from reusable. Most people at all economic levels in developing countries (such as Indonesia and Türkiye) have different perceptions of the lifespan of consumer goods. Considering these items are saleable, or could be donated to those of lower income, they are rare in municipal waste management chains, since they are perceived as used objects that still have an economic value (Damanhuri & Padmi, 2012: 29-30).

Adequate waste disposal or sorting, such as controlled landfills or more tightly operated facilities, is almost entirely the concern of so-called modern high- and upper-middle-income countries. Low-income countries often use open landfills. While 93 percent of waste is discarded in low-income countries, only 2 percent is thrown away in high-income countries (Kaza et al., 2018: 18). As a matter of fact, modern societies can transform wastes into valuable commodities with the advantage of their advanced technologies and waste management systems when compared to less developed countries.

Waste collectors primarily collect the waste generated in countries where waste management systems are underdeveloped, and by including urban wastes, which constitute a severe burden for the balance of nature, into the recycling chain, it turns this burden into an ecological and economic benefit (IPA, 2022: 15).

The transformation of municipal wastes into ecological and economic benefits depends on increasing the recycling rate. Increasing this rate depends on individuals being more environmentally conscious,

expanding recycling networks, and the conditions of all actors in this field. In this context, it is to know the circular economy and the actors involved in this economy.

### ***Traces of social change: Circular economy and its actors***

In today's world, compared to before 2002, food and raw material prices have fluctuated and reached higher levels. As a result, this has created problems related to resources from consumer to producer as it suppresses economic expenditures. Therefore, this situation has made it more problematic to provide lower-cost materials, energy, and credit necessary for business volume creation in a linear economy. As a result, European Union countries accelerated their transition from a linear economy model to a circular economy model (Balbay et al., 2021: 558). On the other hand, with the current economic model, global action plans have been prepared for the transition from the "take-make-dispose" based linear economic model to the "build-use-recycle" based circular economic model with the increasing environmental pollution. The Action Plan on Circular Economy is one of the most critical components of The European Green Deal prepared on this axis. The circular economy model aims to extend the product life cycle by producing less waste and more value (IPA, 2022: 17).

The producer and consumer have significant responsibilities in the circular economic model. It can be said that producers "take the financial and/or organizational responsibility for collecting or retrieving used goods and separating and processing for their recycling" (EPRS-Briefing, 2016, as cited in Gutberlet & Carenzo, 2020: 2), while consumers take on responsibilities such as displaying more conscious behaviors on waste generation and management. The understanding of sustainable development lies in the logic of the circular economy and is based on strict adherence to the principles of this understanding. However, when the socio-economic setting in low- and middle-income countries is taken into account, waste management or recycling in these economies is largely characterized by informality (Gall et al., 2020).

These innovative waste management and recycling strategies, which result from the circular economy, have recently provided many opportunities and allowed the involvement of different actors. The warehouse workers in Turkey are at the forefront of the actors involved in this. Warehousemen are divided into two as licensed and unlicensed. Licensees operate with approval by the Ministry of Environment and Urbanization and by the issuance of licenses by municipalities, and these are called Collection and Sorting Facilities. Collection and sorting facilities recycle waste from markets, shopping malls, organized industrial sites, printing houses, and factories. Unregistered warehouses without a license are more interested in domestic waste. These unregistered warehouses, also called 'interposit,' buy the household wastes collected by solid waste collectors, or rickshaws, which are seen in containers on streets and avenues, and sell them to licensed warehouses (Oksijen, 2021). Therefore, there have been new social transformations in the relationship between production and consumption, woven with environmental problems and combined with human sensibilities. Although this transformation brought many advantages, it also brought negativity. One of the negatives, and perhaps the most important, is forming a large section of the recycling commodity chain, the rules of which are determined by capital and which drags those involved in the sector into informality. This segment will be referred to as solid waste collectors in this study.



Solid waste collectors are sometimes known as "rickshaw pullers" due to the tools they use in this business, sometimes as "those who live off garbage" due to their fields of activity and are defined as people who make a living by collecting waste from homes and selling them to recycling facilities (IPA, 2022: 29). These people play an important role in separating the wastes out of use, collecting them, and turning them into raw materials to become reusable. Although waste collectors worldwide have played a role, they face many problems. One of the main problems is that they work in unhealthy and inhumane conditions. Especially today, the increase in international migrations and the fact that people who leave their homelands as a result of these migrations start to deal with these jobs in the countries they go to can expose them to multiple disadvantageous situations such as exclusion and stigmatization. For this reason, in the next part of the study, these problems of solid waste collectors will be examined based on the fieldwork.

## **Method**

In this study, qualitative method was used by conducting in-depth interviews with people who are trying to maintain their livelihood by collecting solid waste. In accordance with the nature of the qualitative research, it was tried to reach the essence of the waste collection experiences of solid waste collectors. According to Creswell (2012: 26), different basic features are seen at every stage of the research process in qualitative research. A detailed understanding of exploring a problem and a central phenomenon is developed. In this research, a literature review plays a minor role. The purpose of the research and the research questions are indicated in a general way according to the participants' experiences. Words-based data is collected from a few people to get participants' opinions. Data is analyzed for explanations and themes, and broader implications of the findings are interpreted.

## ***Working team***

Solid waste collection in Turkey, which has been going from the 1970s to the present day, has become a method (strategy) for many people from different social segments who cannot be included in the formal labor force, especially in urban areas, to continue their daily lives (IPA, 2022: 29). "Although the exact number of people who make a living by collecting solid waste in Turkey is not known, according to a recent study, it is estimated that about 15,000 people in Istanbul and 40,000 people in Turkey are working only in the field of the paper collection" (AGED, 2021). In this context, it is estimated that there are more than 500 waste collectors residing in various Districts of Ordu Province, wandering around the neighborhoods and sorting garbage containers by the roadside, collecting waste that they consider valuable (e.g., plastic, cardboard, metal). In this context, 20 people (one of whom owns a recycling facility) who earn their living by collecting waste in the Altınordu District of Ordu Province were interviewed. Information on the demographic characteristics of the participants is presented in Table 1 below.



**Table 1.** Demographic characteristics of the participants

Code	Nationality	Gender	Age	Educational Status	Marital Status	Number of Children	Year of Arrival in Ordu Province	Daily Earnings (TRL)	Solid Waste Collection Time (Year)	Previous Job
K1	Iraq	Male	33	Primary School	Married	4	2021	520	1	Truckdriver
K2	Iraq	Male	37	Primary School	Married	4	2016	350	3	Seller of Furniture
K3	Iraq	Male	38	Primary School	Married	4	2017	250	2	Tilemaker
K4	Iraq	Male	36	University	Married	3	2017	400	2	Engineer
K5	Iraq	Male	35	Primary School	Married	2	2016	450	5	Butcher
K6	Iraq	Male	43	Primary School	Married	8	2019	320	3	Agricultural laborer
K7	Iraq	Male	32	University	Single	0	2018	600	2	Dyer
K8	Iraq	Male	35	Primary School	Married	3	2017	300	6	Tailor
K9	Iraq	Male	41	Primary School	Married	4	2018	300	4	Teacher
K10	Iraq	Male	24	Primary School	Single	2	2019	500	3	Student
K11	Iraq	Male	38	Primary School	Married	4	2018	350	2	Engineer
K12	Türkiye	Female	65	Primary School	Married	3	1957	200	5	Housewife
K13	Türkiye	Male	47	Primary School	Married	3	1975	200	10	Building Worker
K14	Syria	Male	44	Primary School	Married	4	2014	350	4	Building Worker
K15	Iraq	Male	45	Primary School	Married	2	2016	400	2	Welder
K16	Iraq	Male	19	Primary School	Single	-	2016	250	1	Student
K17	Iraq	Male	24	Primary School	Single	-	2018	350	3	Student
K18	Iraq	Male	20	Secondary School	Single	-	2019	300	5	Student
K19	Iraq	Male	26	Secondary School	Single	-	2016	400	5	Seller of Furniture
K20	Türkiye	Male	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	Business Owner

Almost all those engaged in solid waste collection in the Altınordu District of Ordu Province comprise people with international protection, temporary residence, or guest status who come with migration, especially Iraqis. Table 1 shows that 16 of the participants are from Iraq, one is from Syria, 1 is the owner of a waste separation facility, and 2 are people working in this facility. People from all age categories, which we can call young, middle, and old, work in this sector, and when the participants were asked about their marital status and having children, they said that the vast majority of them were married and had more than one child. Although their education level is mainly at the primary school level, some participants are at the university and secondary school levels. Although, again, when Table 1 is examined, it is understood that almost all of the participants are male in gender, there may be new to the sector, as well as people who have been doing this job in the sector for a long time. On the other hand, it is seen that the daily earnings of the participants vary between 250 TL and 600 TL, and they did not do this job or any similar job in their homeland before they migrated.



### ***Data collection process***

Qualitative research allows the examination of life experiences, emotions, and subjective meanings of the phenomenon of interest. For this reason, snowball and sequential sampling in qualitative research were used in this study. Although only a few samples were obtained by snowball sampling, sequential sampling was used primarily during the research. In sequential sampling, a researcher "continues to collect sample cases until the amount of new information or variety of case studies is filled. The principle is to collect case studies until a saturation point is reached" (Neuman, 2014: 326). Semi-structured interview form was prepared for the research, and interviews were conducted with solid waste collectors. In order to make an interview, a person from the Cumhuriyet Neighborhood, where solid waste collectors are concentrated, was first contacted. Then, with the help of that person, they went to the households where other people who were engaged in waste collection were resident. Afterwards, contact was made with another participant in the same way. In this way, the zone was recognized through in-depth interviews; the themes to be focused on were determined through participatory observations. In this context, it was tried to determine who carried out solid waste collection, which actors were involved in this work, and what the problems of these actors were. Following these findings, the negotiations continued in the streets and in the recycling facility where they went to sell the wastes they collected. The negotiations started in August 2022 and ended in November 2022. Since many of the participants did not know Turkish very well, some of the interviews were conducted with the help of a participant who is also a solid waste collector. The average interview time was 30 minutes. The interviews were recorded with the permission of the participants.

### ***Analysis of data***

In this study, the data were analyzed according to Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-stage thematic analysis process: 1) familiarity was provided, 2) initial codings were made, 3) potential themes were searched, 4) the relationships between themes and data were checked, 5) themes were identified and named, and 6) the results of the analysis were reported in connection with the research question and literature.

For the analysis of the data, the opinions of two academicians who are experts in their fields were consulted. The data obtained from the participants in the study were gathered around three themes in a way that coincided with the purpose of the research. The first theme of solid waste collectors was "working conditions and their place in working life", the second theme was "migration, poverty, social contact and distance", and the third theme was "stigmatization as a disadvantage".

### ***Ethics in the research process***

The interview form, which was created before the implementation part of the research, was submitted to the Social and Human Sciences Research Ethics Committee of the Presidency of Ordu University on 10.06.2022, and the decision of the board dated 15/06/2022 and numbered 2022-147 was unanimously decided that the form was ethically appropriate.

In order to protect personal information, the identity information of the participants was never asked in the study. During the research, code numbers were given to each participant, and the data were organized through these codes. The participants were told that their participation in the research was



voluntary, that they had no obligation if they did not want to, and that they could leave the interview at any part of the interview if they wanted to.

## Findings

### *Working conditions of solid waste collectors and their place in working life*

Solid waste collectors collect the waste from the houses with a three-wheeled electric motor/scooter, which is a result of the developing technology today, instead of the rickshaw, which was the cargo carrier vehicle they used to collect waste before. These tools also help to separate the collected waste before it reaches the recycling facilities. The covered box added to the electric motor forms the section where waste, such as cardboard and paper, and the upper part is where metal wastes are placed. A large sack attached to the back of the vehicle also ensures the collected plastic waste is placed and transported. This transformation of the means of subsistence possessed by the collectors also changes the mode of production and creates a wide area for itself in the context of production relations. In this field, it can be seen as voluntary-based relationships that individuals establish voluntarily within the framework of their own consent.

It is estimated that many people reside in various districts of Ordu City Center and make their living by collecting waste with electric motors. These people wander the streets one by one, sorting out the garbage containers they see on the side of the road and collecting the waste they consider valuable (e.g., plastic, cardboard, metal) to sell to the recycling facility or warehouses. One of the reasons for choosing waste collection is the fact that they are self-employed with daily earnings without being affiliated with anyone, any institution or organization. In addition, the fact that the number of days a month, which days of the week and at which hours of the day to work is determined by the person himself (in a different word, being "free") is seen as another reason for preference. In this context, as K1 points out:

*"I've done a car wash before, I've worked in construction, I've done marble work, I've done paint and whitewash work, but there's a lot more time left for us in the waste collection business. Also, the job pays well, the salary comes out [enough to live on]. You don't go out in the morning if you want, or you don't go that day at all, so no one interferes." (K1, Male, 33).*

Another participant said the following on this subject:

*"I go to other jobs, I work. Boss, they say come on [work without lingering] they don't give any money, I leave at eight in the morning and come in the evening. [Referring to the solid waste collection he's doing now], but it's my job." (K2, Male, 37).*

According to Campbell (2018: 275), who conducted similar studies on waste collectors in Thailand, solid waste collectors also identified less ambiguous advantages of this job compared to regular paid employment. Collectors, in particular, saw their work as "self-employment." This self-employment allowed them to choose their working hours, take time off when sick or needed to care for sick children and avoid manager harassment. Waste collectors are partly motivated by a dislike for normative forms of capitalist labour. They receive a daily cash income without waiting a month for salary payments, as in local garment shops. This urgency of income has been crucial in motivating individuals experiencing sudden economic hardships to turn to waste collection.



Daily profit is obtained by delivering the waste collected by the waste collectors at certain times to the recycling facility. There is no standard for daily earnings. These differences are due to many variables such as kilogram, type, quality, working time, and collected waste conditions. The wishes and desires of the collectors on that day, especially their experiences, can affect this difference. In interviews with the participants, the collectors reported that they received an average of 250 TL to 600 TL per day.

On the other hand, seasonal conditions may cause variability in the number of days per month to collect waste. While collectors go out to collect waste almost every day in the summer (or even twice a day), they come out less during the winter and spring months, when there is a lot of cold and rain, but some may see these harsh weather conditions as an "opportunity". Especially in recent times, the rapid increase in the number of collectors has led some collectors to follow strategies in this way. When the number of collectors is negligible, waste collection is carried out in two shifts, from morning to noon and then again until sunset. On days when waste is scarce, and collectors are concentrated, longer working hours are needed. As K2 points out on this axis:

*"This business has winter, rain and cold. For example, we have a raincoat and we put it on and go out, but on rainy days, there are not many people who go out to collect it; on the other hand, I usually choose rainy days because it's the opportunity. Then I can collect as much plastic and cardboard as the world." (K1, Male, 33).*

Especially in recent times, the arrival of more immigrants in the Ordu province and the fact that these migrants have undertaken waste collection has increased the competition among solid waste collectors. This has forced solid waste collectors to work longer hours and come long distances to generate enough recyclable material to meet urgent household needs and the associated income.

*"2 years ago, I was filling the car in 2 hours, maximum 3 hours, but now it is not possible... The number of collectors has increased a lot, and people do not throw garbage anymore. In the past, I was going to a construction site, I was filling the motor completely, nylon, piece iron... I was telling the boss [owner of the construction], he was saying ok brother, now he says I will not give it. Now nobody gives them, they collect it themselves... In the past, people were throwing everything away, phone, T.V. and household items, now they don't. Now it has become much more difficult to maintain this job. I work 6 hours 7 hours a day, but I earn enough money [to meet daily needs]. Now I look at that trash, it's empty, I look at the other one and it's empty, the other one has nothing. In the past, there were few families doing this business. Now Syrians, Iraqis, and Afghans have come from Istanbul and many other places, and the number of people doing this job has increased." (K2, Male, 37).*

Although they do their own job, many solid waste collectors see the waste collection as a profession at the bottom of the social hierarchy. It is dirty, dangerous, humiliating, and has a reduced financial return (Campbell, 2018: 276). Among those who make a living by collecting waste are some collectors owning more than one three-wheeler, cased, electric motor/scooter or acquiring more rechargeable batteries, economic difficulties at the global, national, and local axis, and as a result of the circular economy, city dwellers are becoming more conscious of recycling, and some are accumulating waste at home and selling them to recycling facilities, and finally, perhaps most importantly, the inclusion of new immigrants at the bottom of the supply chain and the last links of the chain, the competition among people who make a living by collecting waste has been increasing lately.

The work environment is as informal as a solid waste collection for work motivation for waged labour. The working environment directs which districts of the city and in what way the collectors will collect waste and determines the organization of labour. In this context, the structure of the garbage container on the roadsides, the width of the roads, the proximity or distance of the solid waste collection facility, the economic situation of the residents, and the small or large number of people in the neighbourhood are important factors affecting the working conditions of the solid waste collectors. In interviews with collectors, almost many collectors stated that the most ideal working environment was the Cumhuriyet neighbourhood. In this neighbourhood, which is one of the developing settlements of the city, the streets are more comprehensive than in other neighbourhoods. Therefore, they are more suitable for the use of electric motors.

On the other hand, garbage containers still need to be modernized in these districts. Underground garbage containers, which were initially placed in Karşıyaka and Karapınar Neighbourhoods in the Ordu city center, have also increased in number in districts close to the city center (such as Selimiye, Bahçelievler, Akyazı and Durugöl Neighbourhoods). Again, in these districts, the number of covered garbage containers is higher than the conventional ones, which are more suitable for waste collection. On the other hand, the electric motors used in the waste collection are charged, which leads the collectors to collect waste near recycling facilities. In addition, some recycling facilities must be selective about receiving the collected waste (such as not buying coloured bags or unqualified plastics). Even individuals in the predominantly middle and upper-middle-income groups reside in this neighbourhood to determine work motivation and labour organization.

*"Previously, the job was better, and we were collecting bags of all colours. Black bags, for example, we were always collecting before, we were finding a lot of material. We don't collect it anymore; the material is scarce, and life is more expensive. Our business has decreased. That is... factories [solid waste sorting plants] now only buy white bags. There is only one factory that buys bags of each colour. In the past, four hours, one hour [between one hour and four hours] 100 kilograms, a sack. Now, I wrap 50-55 kilograms of plastic from morning to evening." (K3, Male, 38).*

For collectors, not all wastes are recyclable, and wastes with this quality and wastes that do not have this quality are found together. In the solid waste collection, collectors must seek valuable recyclable materials before collection. Therefore, it is only possible for collectors to search, sort and collect without touching the waste. Waste collection at night with one-handed or head-mounted lanterns, especially with no daylight, requires a closer approach to the waste. Although a glove, mask, stick, or hoe is used in these processes, the collector cannot avoid being exposed to the harmful effects of waste. This situation is valid for those who collect and those who sort at the recycling facility. A participant who has been doing sorting work at the recycling facility for a long time and dealing with collection in the remaining of his time whenever he has the opportunity said the following on this subject.

*"Recently, an occupational safety specialist came. At that time, I was sorting plastic waste. He warned me not to work like this when he saw that I was without gloves. Well, I cannot understand the quality of the goods without touching the plastic and feeling it. So I said I had to touch him." (K13, Male, 47).*

Injuries and diseases associated with solid waste collection are among the highest (Bunn et al., 2011: 1043). It is possible to become ill from frequent exposure to hazardous substances when collecting waste



(Mol et al., 2019: 371). There are occupational health risks associated with solid waste handling around the world due to the content of the material, the emissions from the material, and the equipment (Cointreau, 2006: 1). There are several factors that negatively impact domestic waste collector's health and safety, including their poor attitudes and safety behaviours, the failure of supervisors and managers to enforce safety standards, and the stress they experience from poor working conditions (Lissah et al., 2020: 1). According to the domestic waste collectors, they suffer from occupational injuries, psychosocial disorders, stress related to their jobs, and frequent burnout. Many domestic waste collectors did not have guaranteed health insurance coverage, so they developed coping strategies, including self-medication, to cope with these occupational hazards (Lissah et al., 2022: 1). They are exposed to harmful micro-organisms and toxic substances that are potentially found in the air through respiration (Yang et al., 2001). For this reason, many of the participants often referred to their work as "dirty work".

*"The most difficult thing about this job is that it is dirty work... It is dirty for the people around and for us. We wear gloves to hold it, but the human soul does not accept it. Well, we work in difficult [difficult conditions]." (K11, Male, 38).*

The discovery of the profitability of waste (garbage) as a commercial commodity for the upper classes, on the other hand, with the development of environmental ideas, recycling has gained importance and waste collection and evaluation has become increasingly important; it began to prevent the lower classes from relating to waste as comfortably as before. In the past, waste collectors could easily mix garbage and collect the products that served them. However, these works they have done have become a sector whose rules are controlled by capital (Özsoy, 2012: 111). Although, as mentioned above, solid waste collectors work on their own account, they exhibit dependent relationships with the organization of labour. On the other hand, there cannot be talk of labour exploitation in places with no single buyer. However, according to the information obtained from the interviews and observations in the field study, it has been observed that the buyers of recyclable materials act selectively for some materials and some collectors. Again, some participants stated that public officials guided them about where and how they would sell the material they collected. With the significant increase in the number of waste collectors recently, such situations have led solid waste collectors to work under challenging conditions and long working hours. In addition, all those who try to make a living by collecting solid waste (although it is thought that the most important reason for this is that immigrants are doing this job) work informally. All of this is an indirect indicator of labour exploitation, and more importantly, as Denning (2010: 79) states, the only thing worse than being exploited in capitalism is not being exploited.

Similarly, Campbell, who has studied solid waste collectors, said about the situation of unregistered migrant waste collectors in Mae Sot, Thailand, even though they work informally, this situation would not be enough to exclude them from the proletarian class because -in his opinion- ultimately, the proletariat is defined by dispossession, not employment. Possession of a used rice sack, a hoe, and some boots does not negate this common condition. For this reason, waste collectors struggle to retain a proletarian character, even when waged labour is absent (Campbell, 2018: 284). According to Bourdieu, economic capital, which includes all of an individual's economic resources, indicates both material wealth and income, and having economic capital facilitates access to other capitals (cultural, social,

symbolic) as well (Jourdain & Naulin, 2020: 106). Although solid waste collectors obtain a certain level of economic capital with their means of subsistence, more than this capital is needed to reach other capitals. In addition, the fact that those who continue this work do not know the language, culture, social, political, and economic conditions of those who come by migration to society, where they are strangers, both makes access to these capitals more difficult and leads to the poorest of the poor beyond representing a class and multiple disadvantaged situations.

### ***Migration, poverty, social contact and distance***

Migration is, in the simplest terms, the name of the act of relocation from a particular place of residence to another place of residence. External migration is the act of relocating outside the borders of the country of residence. This migration movement can also have many reasons. For example, individuals may no longer be able to continue their production activities to ensure their livelihood in the geography they live in due to global warming and climate change and, therefore, may migrate. In addition, they may leave the country they live in because they have been subjected to ethnic discrimination, political repression, or terrorist attacks, or may settle in other countries since they are unemployed as a result of structural changes and economic crises in the country of which they are citizens. As a result, they cannot access sufficient income, education, and health facilities in the same country (Koca, 2021: 59). Whatever the reason, migration leads to many social, political, economic and cultural changes both for the individuals who migrate and on the societies, they leave and settle in.

There are solid causal contexts between migration and poverty on this axis, especially at the individual level. While poverty can affect individuals' decision to migrate, where and how they will go, in some cases, migration can affect the poverty levels of individuals (Koca, 2021). As of December 2017, 4,085 refugees, including 2,935 Iraqis, 653 Syrians, 275 Afghans, 159 Iranians, and 63 other countries, live in Ordu (IHA, December, 19, 2017). In the city, most solid waste collectors are Iraqi nationals who came with immigration. In the interviews with the participants, most stated that, apart from the problems caused by migration, they were better off in their pre-migration lives, especially in economic and social terms. When Table 1 is examined, it is seen that people who earn their living by collecting solid waste mainly work in more regular and higher-income jobs before migrating. As a matter of fact, in the period before migration, people working in the solid waste collection had less social distance from other segments of society. In this regard, one of the participants stated:

*"We see ourselves here as the poor, the lowest, so I collect [recyclable waste]. I look at people, so I say I'm not human. Why am I doing this job, why are people not doing that, why are they always [wearing] clean clothes and going for a sightseeing. Brother, this is how we are in Turkey, that is, we are poor, but our life in Iraq is something different... Good in Iraq, I am rich, I am the boss." (K2, Male, 37).*

From The Chicago School's perspective, society consists of the cultural level of a standard set of beliefs, values, and attitudes that emerge from social interaction and contact. Modern transport and communication systems and high geographic mobility facilitate social interaction. The modern urban economy requires workers to move outside their neighbourhoods and ethnic communities to work. The decline and rise of various regional industries also force workers to move from one part of the country to another. These trends increase contact and interactions across ethnic boundaries (Moghaddam &





Solliday, 1991: 56). The fact that most of the immigrants have a limited level of language skills, low levels of education, lack of skilled jobs and many social rights causes them to turn to informal labour and work in marginal jobs to overcome the economic difficulties encountered daily. Especially the fact that they are working in a job that requires long working hours and requires working under challenging conditions, such as solid waste collection, causes them to face poverty and increase their social distance from other segments of society.

As it is known, recently, Turkey has been the country with the highest international migration in the world. For this reason, "social harmony" is among the policies planned to be implemented for immigrants, but the achievement of harmony depends on the migrants being in sufficient interaction with other segments of the society and minimizing social distance. In this, individuals need enough free time. However, due to the long working hours and difficult working conditions of the individuals who came to the city of Ordu with migration and engaged in solid waste collection, the leisure activities of the waste collectors are almost non-existent. Therefore, solid waste collectors can only participate in a few activities in urban life and may have limited interaction with other segments of society. This situation prevents them from opening their social distance from other segments of society and establishing adequate contacts for interaction. Likewise, in the interviews with the participants, many participants stated that they usually came into contact with people who came with immigration like themselves and were from the same homeland, who spoke the same language and did almost similar jobs, and that they did not participate in social activities in urban life. As Güngördü and Özgen (2021: 262) point out, the long working hours of collectors in the flow of daily life prevent them from being involved in leisure activities in urban life. In addition, since leisure activities have gained functionality through consumer culture in capitalist city life, workers are deprived of economic opportunities to have free time even if they want to.

The most striking reality about the need for leisure in today's modern society is the complete break from real life, such as work and family life. The enjoyment/distraction quality of leisure time increases in this way. Leisure time should not bring new concerns to individuals; individuals should not have obligations. It should free them from worries and obligations, and relaxation and pleasure should be the main lines of leisure according to those concerned (Lefebvre, 2010: 38). On the other hand, certain conditions must be met in order for one-to-one contact and interaction between groups to result in a positive outcome. These conditions include the equality of individuals in status, the coming together of these people around a common goal, the existence of a situation that requires a common purpose or cooperation, and the support of contact and relationship between groups by other institutions and the environment (Allport, 1954, as cited in Çuhadar, 2018: 258). According to the information obtained from the research, it is seen that individuals will approach positively prejudiced against outgroup members who are similar to themselves. Accordingly, the more similar the members of a society feel to each other, the more positively they will be inclined toward each other. Hypothetically, this cheerful disposition will lead to a heightened acceptance of others, ultimately resulting in a more cohesive and peaceful society (Moghaddam & Solliday, 1991: 57).



### ***Waste collection as a disadvantage from social exclusion to stigma***

Despite their crucial role in the waste management chain worldwide, it is believed that subsistence waste collectors are generally regarded as the outcasts of society (Khan, 1996, as cited in Langenhoven & Dyssel, 2007: 114). Almost many do not have access to state-sponsored social protection, and many often live in harsh conditions. Sometimes they must expose themselves to dangers and risks to gain access to valuable materials. Waste pickers have the lowest pay in the recycling chain and often face social stigma and economic exploitation, working under precarious conditions in a disadvantageous market (Gutberlet & Carenzo, 2020: 3). In particular, those who come with migration think that they can make a living in urban areas rather than rural areas, even though their quality of life will deteriorate much worse and they do not contribute more to the cities than their poverty. In most cases, the number of employers does not increase at the same rate as the number of job seekers. Many of them, on the other hand, cannot offer any qualifications. A large proportion of unemployed migrants without capital or professional qualifications compulsorily apply to the informal sector. This informal employment is not normally recorded and is therefore not included in any official statistics (Damanhuri & Padmi, 2012: 24). Therefore, they fall into a disadvantageous position because they need more personal and social rights. Their social position because they continue to make a living by collecting waste is combined with international migration. Therefore, they can enter multiple disadvantaged situations ranging from social exclusion to stigmatization.

As mentioned above, solid waste collection can take a long time to collect enough waste to be sold and may last until late hours. In such cases, collectors can park their waste-filled means of support in areas where their homes or buildings are usually located, and wait to take them to recycle facilities in the morning. In addition, although it is very rare, the wastes collected in the vacant areas of the residences can be kept waiting because there is not enough waste to be sold to the recycling facility. In the interviews held with the participants on this subject, some participants expressed the following:

*“For example, real estate agents don’t give me a house [as a tenant] because of my work. He asks, what do you do, I collect cardboard, when I say, he gives up renting the house to me.” (K19, Male, 26).*

Another participant:

*“I usually don’t have problems with my neighbours where I live. I’m on good terms with young people, but sometimes when I come waste-collection, aunts sit in front of the building where I live, and they are always angry with me for putting the motor here.” (K7, Male, 32).*

Disadvantaged groups have a certain status in the social hierarchy and are relatively lower because of their disadvantages in the stratification system. When the expectations of some disadvantaged statuses by society and the evaluations of the people with these statuses contain negativity, situations such as social exclusion and discrimination arise (Taş & Arık, 2020: 30-31). Most, if not all, collectors see the waste collection as a humiliating source of livelihood. In participant interviews, solid waste collectors often called their work "dirty work." On the other hand, the fact that those who work in this business have migrated and are not welcomed by some groups in the society they belong to, knowing no or limited language, having different lifestyles, and being deprived of many social rights have brought them face



to face with social exclusion, stigma, and ignorance. In this context, one of the participants stated the following:

*"In Iraq, relatives are asking what are you doing? I'm not telling them that I'm doing dirty work here, that is, I'm collecting garbage, I'm telling them that I'm working in construction... It's not a shame, but folks look at us as a bad thing, not all of them. There is a nice man with humanity, and someone else sees us as something else bad." (K1, Male, 33).*

Not working in a job with employment networks and security, weakening of relations with the labour market, and the absence of a secure and regular income bring about social exclusion in economic terms. In addition, the lack of political representation of individuals or their weakening, the transformation of features such as language, religion and lifestyle, which are different from the general society, into a form of exclusion, also cause the individual to be excluded by hindering his integration with the society. When all these processes are combined, a form of exclusion emerges that affects every aspect of life and can be called permanent (Madanipour, 2003, as cited in Akkan vd., 2016: 116-117).

According to the determinations of Çayır (2018: 11), "in modern societies where social inequality prevails, some groups are more dominant, dominant and powerful than others. These dominant groups can stigmatize, identify and label weaker groups, termed minorities, subordinates". On this axis, according to Gofman, there are differences between discredited stigma and discreditable stigma. The direction of interaction established between stigmatized individuals and normal people develops depending on which of these two types of stigmas an individual has. In the case of discredited stigmatization, the actor (for example, someone who is paralyzed from the waist down or has lost a limb) assumes that the differences are known to or seen by the viewers. A stigma that can be discredited is one in which the differences (for example, someone who has had a colostomy surgery or a homosexual pretending to be heterosexual) is not known or perceived by the audience. The main dramaturgical challenge for someone with the stigma of being discredited is to manage the tension generated by people knowing about the problem. For someone with a stigma that can be discredited, the dramaturgical problem is to manage information so that the difference is not known to the audience (Ritzer & Stepnisky, 2015: 123). Individuals in a lower position can also manage the process by developing strategies that vary according to whether the stigma is visible. Some groups may have to hide themselves and live different lives in cases where the stigma is not visible. However, some groups may struggle to claim and give it status in cases where the stamp is visible. Apart from these, the groups in the lower position can also object to their position and carry out social and political movements in line with the demands for equality (Çayır, 2018: 13).

In the interviews with the participants, one participant stated that he wore a mask while trying not to be recognized. In contrast, another participant stated that he was worried that if a theft crime was committed, the crime might fall on him, and therefore he did not wear a mask while working. In this case, both participants follow a strategy of managing the tension produced by the fact that people know the problem in this way. On the other hand, in the remaining parts of the study, one of the participants told his acquaintances that he was working in a different job than his actual job. This participant tried not to fall into a stigma situation that could become discredited by managing information so that those around him would not know the difference.

Apart from these, social and political movements were not observed in the province where the study was conducted. However, with the decision of the Governorship of Istanbul, in August 2021, the police and municipal police officers raided nearly 100 waste collection warehouses; in September 2021, recycling workers made a press statement by saying "We are trying to earn our half-starved lives from the garbage, even they are trying to prevent this" (Sendika.org, 2021), which can be shown as an example of social and political movements. In addition, Recycling Workers' Association and Katık Magazine can be added to this example.

As a result, as IPA (2022: 32) states, "social exclusion and marginalization practices have a multidimensional effect among waste collectors. One dimension of exclusion is the negative perception of waste collectors in society. The fact that they are not accepted in social life and that their work is not respected pushes waste collectors out of social solidarity networks." On the other hand, according to the findings made by Güngördü (2021: 135) in his study titled 'Psychosocial Reflections on the Urban Poverty Experiences of Solid Waste Workers: The Case of Ankara', "situations such as low income of informal working conditions and inability to work in healthy and clean conditions constitute the marginalization that workers are exposed to in the social field while working in the city".

## **Discussion and conclusions**

Consumption-oriented changing trends in the social sphere have brought along waste production. As a result of excessive consumption, waste has become one of the important problems of social life. Many ways have been sought to get rid of these wastes. One of the ways found has been recycling, which will both solve environmental problems and increase profitability in the axis of capitalist values. However, although recycling solves some problems, it has also brought some problems. The segment that experienced these problems the most was the solid waste collectors, which constitute one of the most important links of the recycling chain and are at the lowest step. For this reason, this study examines how the recycling sector shapes the labor process in Ordu, how solid waste collectors cope with the difficult working conditions, the meaning of collecting waste for them, and the effects on their social position.

Certain issues related to the economic and social context framing the livelihoods efforts of solid waste collectors were found to be of particular importance. Of these, elements related to the economic context have also emerged as factors that reveal their working conditions and their place in working life. First, solid waste collectors see the work they do as a way to make a living in an economic sense, earn varying amounts of daily income from the work they do, and perform this work as a kind of "self-employment". The first of these results was supported by Campbell (2018)'s study of solid waste collectors in Thailand as the most important issues that motivated them to do this work.

The second is that solid waste collectors face a high health risk such as injury, illness and describe the work they do as "dirty work". Santos et al. (2013) found that one-third of the workers collecting solid waste in their study were sick. According to them, this population is in a serious socio-environmental fragility, lives in poor hygiene and high-risk sanitary conditions, is exposed to hunger and disease.

The third is informality and increased competition, which also have an impact on the shaping of social dimensions. It has been observed that the biggest factor in unregistered work is migration. This



situation is easily understood from the demographic characteristics of the participants in the remaining parts of the study. The majority of solid waste collectors in Ordu are immigrants, especially Iraqis. In this context, people who are detached from the cultural, social, economic, and political contexts of the society they belong to find themselves in different necessary contexts, are deprived of many social rights and experience deep poverty in the places they migrate, have turned to searches to overcome the economic problems they have fallen into. Thus, they encountered solid waste collection, a part of the recycling sector characterized by informality. As a result, while waste is the social reflection of the "reproduction of consumption," solid waste collection reflects the re-consumption of consumption by the individual.

In their study on solid waste collectors in Delhi, Hayami et al. found that a large proportion of migrants were engaged in solid waste collection. According to them, it is a relatively easy occupation for new migrants from rural areas to earn income by collecting solid waste. Waste collection does not require much capital and skills (Hayami et al., 2006: 45). On the other hand, when looking at the literature (Hayami et al., 2006; Ekşi, 2017; Campbell, 2018; Güngördü & Özgen, 2021), similar to this study, it is seen that many findings have been made regarding the informal work of solid waste collectors. However, studies linking this informality to migration have been limited. In addition, with the increase in migration in recent times, competition among waste collectors has gradually increased. Waste collectors used to spend only certain times of the day working, but now they spend a large part of it working. This has led them to be more visible in any neighbourhood or street of the city at any time of the day. According to Erdoğan (2020: 78-79), although informality cannot be naturalized, sustained, and legitimized for those who come with migration, it creates an economic refuge for many people who come with migration.

Finally, the fourth is poverty and stigma. As mentioned above, it was seen that the small number of waste collectors and the fact that they allowed them to do their work freely were the most important factors that attracted them to the solid waste collection business; however, the rapid increase in the number of collectors over time forced them to travel more distance and to work in more challenging conditions. Thus, the working environment and conditions are among the most critical factors that put solid waste collectors at a disadvantage. For this reason, there are strong relationships between the working conditions of solid waste collectors and their daily life practices. In addition to making valuable contributions to society, such as cleaning the city and protecting the environment by converting unused waste into efficient resources, solid waste collectors have also been people experiencing poverty, who form the lower layer of the informal sector and can barely make a living, in other words, they have been socially excluded and stigmatized because their experience of the relationship between the social sphere and their class position in working life can hinder or delay social integration due to social contact and distance.

The results obtained in this study regarding the poverty and stigmatisation of solid waste collectors support the interpretations in Güngördü and Özgen's study on solid waste collectors in Ankara and Özsoy's study on Solid Waste Magazine. In both studies, it was stated that solid waste collectors experienced stigmatisation based on poverty (Özsoy, 2012; Güngördü & Özgen, 2021). In this context,

Özsoy (2012: 120) stated that "the ill-treatment they receive while working, the devaluing gaze of the other is a problem that requires coping for waste pickers".

In conclusion, when solid waste collectors' solid waste collection experiences are analysed, many intertwined situations are encountered. For them, waste collection is not only a livelihood strategy but also the result of some contextual imperatives. Because "According to Bourdieu, strategies do not imply consciously planned, rational choices. They often appear logical and appropriate because they are informed by the individual's habitus, which acts as a mediator between social structures and individual practices" (Deffner, 2010, as cited in Didero, 2012: 30). In this study, it was observed that individuals' waste collection experiences were shaped according to social and economic conditions. On the other hand, although solid waste collection work carries many difficulties and negativities, if solid waste collection can be organised and supported with the right policies to be followed, it can create employment for many people and can be one of the important means of earning income.

### Conflict of Interest Statement

There is no financial conflict of interest with any institution, organization, person related to our article titled "Investigation of Solid Waste Collectors with Economic and Social Dimensions?" and there is no conflict of interest between the authors.

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## Genişletilmiş Özet

### Giriş

Günümüz toplumlarında son zamanlarda görülen aşırı tüketim ve bu tüketimin sonucunda oluşan her türlü atığın, kapitalist değerler ekseninde yeniden rafine edilerek piyasaya kazandırılmaya çalışılması, modern toplumun insanlığa sunduğu birçok alanda birçok değişimleri beraberinde getirmiştir. Bu değişimin görüldüğü alanda, tüm dünyayı ilgilendiren, çevresel sorunlarla iliştilen ve insani duyarlılıklarla birleştirilen, üretim ve tüketim arasındaki ilişkide beliren; geri dönüşüm olmuştur. Zira geri dönüşüm, sadece modern toplumlar için değil, aynı zamanda geri(de) kalmış toplumlar için de güçlü bir sektör haline gelmiş, toplumdaki birçok kesimin ilgi odağı olmuştur. Bu kesimlerden biri olan ve geri dönüşüm sektörünün en alt basamağında yer alan katı atık toplayıcıları, başta kayıt dışı emek olmak üzere zor koşullar altında çalışmakta ve bu şekilde çalışarak geçimlerini sürdürenlerin sayısı her geçen gün artmaktadır.

Geçim, insanların yeteneklerini ve onların yiyecek, gelir ve servetleri dahil olmak üzere yaşam araçlarını içeren bir kavramdır (Chambers ve Conway, 1992: 1). Geçim stratejileri terimi ise hanehalklarının aynı seviyede hayatta kalmak veya yukarı doğru hareketlilik elde etmek için iç ve dış faktörlere tepki olarak yaptığı bir dizi ayarlamayı ifade eder (Lingman, 2005: 16). Geçim stratejisi analizinde bireyler pasif değil üretken ve aktif aktörler olarak görülür. Ancak bireylerin geliştirmiş oldukları stratejiler, onları sahip oldukları kaynaklardan ve yapısal koşullardan bağımsız değildir (Güneş, 2010; Didero, 2012). Katı atık toplama bireylerin yaşadıkları günlük ekonomik sıkıntıların üstesinden gelmek için kullandıkları etkili araçlarından biridir. Onlar her ne kadar bu işin seçilmesi için özgür hareket ediyorlar gibi görünseler de kayıt dışı ekonomiye eklenme durumlarının sahip oldukları kaynaklarla ve yapısal sorunlarla ilişkisi vardır.

Ancak yapılan literatür taramasında özellikle Türkiye’de, katı atık toplayıcıların atık toplama deneyimlerine ve bu deneyimlere etki eden ekonomik (çalışma koşulları) ve toplumsal (göç, yoksulluk, damgalanma gibi) koşulların belirleyiciliği ekseninde bütünlüklü biçimde ele alan saha çalışmalarının oldukça sınırlı düzeyde olduğu görülmektedir. Bu kapsamda bu çalışma literatürdeki boşluğu dikkate alarak katı atık toplayıcılarının atık toplama deneyimlerini anlamayı ve yorumlamayı amaçlamaktadır. Araştırmada yanıt aranan temel sorular şunlardır:

1) Katı atık toplayıcıları yaptıkları işe ilişkin ekonomik beklentileri nasıl anlıyor ve yapmış oldukları işle ilgili olarak algıladıkları ekonomik beklentilere nasıl anlam veriyorlar?

2) Hangi toplumsal durumlar atık toplama deneyimlerine etki ediyor? Olumlu veya olumsuz değerlendirmelerle damgalanma gibi etiketlenme süreçleri yaşıyorlar mı?

### Yöntem

Bu çalışma da katı atık toplayarak geçimlerini sürdürmeye çalışan kişiler ile derinlemesine görüşmeler yapılarak nitel yöntemden faydalanılmıştır. Nitel araştırmanın doğasına uygun bir şekilde katı atık toplayıcıların atık toplama deneyimlerinin özüne ulaşmaya çalışılmıştır. Nitel araştırmalar, yaşam deneyimlerinin, duyguların ve ilgilenen olguya ilişkin öznel anlamların incelenmesine olanak tanır. Bu nedenle bu çalışmada nitel araştırmalarda kullanılan kartopu ve ardışık örnekleme yöntemlerinden faydalanılmıştır. Araştırma esnasında örneğin çok azı kartopu örnekleme yoluyla elde edilmiş olsa da öncelikle ardışık örnekleme kullanılmıştır. Bir araştırmacı ardışık örneklemede, “yeni bilgi miktarı ya da örnek olay çeşitliliği dolana kadar örnek olay toplamayı sürdürür. Prensipte, bir doyum noktasına ulaşıncaya kadar örnek olay toplamaktır” (Neuman, 2014: 326). Araştırma için yarı yapılandırılmış görüşme formu hazırlanarak, katı atık toplayıcıları ile görüşmeler yapılmıştır.

### Sonuç ve tartışma



*Katı atık toplayanların geçimlerini sürdürme çabalarını çerçeveleyen ekonomik ve sosyal bağlamla ilgili bazı konuların özel bir öneme sahip olduğu görülmüştür. Bunlardan ekonomik bağlamla ilgili unsurlar onların çalışma koşullarını ve çalışma hayatındaki yerlerini ortaya koyan etkenler olarak da ortaya çıkmıştır. İlk olarak katı atık toplayıcıların yaptıkları işi ekonomik anlamda geçimlerini sağlamanın bir yolu olarak gördükleri, yaptıkları işten değişen miktarlarda günlük kazançlar elde ettikleri ve bu işi bir tür "serbest meslek" olarak icra ettikleri şeklindedir. Elde edilen bu sonuçlardan ilkinin, Campbell (2018)'in Tayland'da katı atık toplayanlar üzerine yaptığı çalışmada onları bu işi yapmaya motive eden en önemli konular olarak yorumlamasını desteklemiştir.*

*İkincisi, katı atık toplayıcıları yaralanma, hastalanma gibi yüksek sağlık riski ile karşı karşıya kalmakta ve yaptıkları işi "pis iş" olarak tanımlamaktadı. Santos ve arkadaşları (2013) da yapmış oldukları çalışmada katı atık toplayan işçilerin üçte birinin hasta olduğunu belirlemiştir. Onlara göre bu nüfus ciddi bir sosyo-çevresel kırılganlık içindedir, yetersiz hijyen ve yüksek riskli sağlık koşullarında yaşamakta, açlık ve hastalığa maruz kalmaktadır.*

*Üçüncüsü, sosyal boyutların biçimlenmesinde de etkisi olan kayıt dışılık ve artan rekabettir. Kayıt dışı çalışma konusunda en büyük etkenin göç olduğu gözlemlenmiştir. Çalışmada yer alan katılımcıların demografik özelliklerinden de bu durum kolaylıkla anlaşılmaktadır. Ordu ilinde katı atık toplayanların büyük çoğunluğunu göç ile gelenler özellikle de Iraklılar oluşturmaktadır. Bu kapsamda, ait oldukları toplumun kültürel, sosyal, ekonomik ve politik bağlamlarından kopan ve farklı zorunlu bağlamlar içinde kendini bulan, göç ettikleri yerlerde birçok sosyal haklardan mahrum kalan ve derin yoksulluk yaşayan kişiler, içine düşmüş oldukları ekonomik sıkıntıların üstesinden gelmek için arayışlara yönelmişlerdir. Böylece geri dönüşüm sektörünün en önemli parçası olan ve kayıt dışılıkla karakterize edilen katı atık toplama işi ile karşılaşmışlardır. Bunun bir sonucu olarak atıklar, "tüketimin yeniden üretilmesi"nin toplumsal yansımasyken, katı atık toplayıcılığı ise tüketimin yeniden tüketilmesinin bireye yansımalarının temsili olmuştur.*

*Hayami ve arkadaşları da Delhi'de katı atık toplayanlar üzerine yapmış oldukları çalışmada, göç ile gelenlerin büyük bir kısmının katı atık toplama işi ile uğraştıklarını saptamışlardır. Onlara göre, kırsal alanlardan gelen yeni göçmenler için katı atıkları toplayarak kazanç elde etmek, nispeten kolay bir uğraş alanıdır. Çünkü atık toplamak çok fazla sermaye ve beceri gereksinimi içermemektedir (Hayami et al, 2006: 45). Diğer yandan literatüre bakıldığında (Hayami et al., 2006; Ekşi, 2017; Campbell, 2018; Güngördü ve Özgen, 2021), bu çalışma ile benzer şekilde katı atık toplayıcıların kayıt dışı çalıştıklarına ilişkin birçok saptama yapıldığı görülmektedir. Ancak bu kayıt dışılığı göç ile ilişkilendiren çalışmalar sınırlı düzeyde kalmıştır. Ayrıca son zamanlarda göçlerin artması ile atık toplayanlar arasındaki rekabette giderek artmıştır. Atık toplayanlar önceleri sadece günün belirli zamanlarını çalışarak geçirirlerken, şimdilerde ise büyük bir kısmını çalışarak geçirmektedirler. Bu durum onların günün her saatinde kentin herhangi bir mahallesinde veya sokağında daha fazla görünür olmalarına yol açmıştır. Erdoğan (2020: 78-79)'a göre, kayıt dışılık, göç ile gelen çalışanlar için her ne kadar doğallaştırılamaz, sürdürülemez ve meşrulaştırılamaz olsa da göç ile gelen çok sayıda kişi için ekonomik sığınma alanı meydana getirmektedir.*

*Son olarak dördüncüsü yoksulluk ve damgalanma durumlarıdır. Yukarıda da belirtildiği gibi başlangıçta atık toplama işi yapanların az sayıda olması, serbest olarak da kendi işlerini yapmalarına imkân sağlaması onları katı atık toplama işine çeken en önemli etkenler olduğu görülmüştür. Ancak zamanla toplayıcı sayısındaki hızlı artış, onları daha fazla mesafe kat etmeye ve daha zor koşullar içinde çalışmaya zorlamıştır. Böylece çalışma ortamı ve koşulları katı atık toplayıcılarını dezavantajlı duruma düşüren en önemli unsurların başında yer almıştır. Bu nedenle katı atık toplayıcılarının içinde buldukları çalışma koşulları ile gündelik hayat pratikleri arasında güçlü ilişkiler olduğunu söylemek mümkündür. Katı atık toplayıcıları, kullanılmayan atıkları verimli kaynaklara dönüştürerek kentin temizlenmesi, çevrenin korunması gibi topluma değerli katkılarda*

*bulunmalarının yanı sıra enformel sektörün alt katmanını oluşturan ve geçimlerini zar zor sağlayabilen yoksulları, diğer bir deyişle toplumsal dışlananları ve damgalananları olmuşlardır. Çünkü toplumsal alanla çalışma hayatındaki sınıfsal konumları arasındaki ilişki deneyimleri, toplumsal temas ve mesafe gereği toplumsal bütünleşmeyi engellediği gibi geciktirebilmektedir.*

*Bu çalışmada katı atık toplayıcıların yoksulluk ve damgalanma durumlarına ilişkin elde edilen sonuçlar Güngördü ve Özgen'in Ankara'da katı atık toplayıcıları üzerine yapmış oldukları çalışma ile Özsoy'un Katı Atık Dergisi üzerine yapmış olduğu çalışmadaki yorumlamaları destekler niteliktedir. Her iki çalışmada da katı atık toplayıcıların, yoksulluğa dayalı damgalanma durumları yaşadığı belirtilmiştir (Özsoy, 2012; Güngördü ve Özgen, 2021). Bu bağlamda Özsoy (2012, 120), "çalışırken gördükleri kötü muamele, ötekinin kendilerine değersizleştirerek bakışı atık toplayıcılar için baş edilmeyi gerektiren bir sorundur" demiştir.*

*Sonuç olarak katı atık toplayıcıların katı atık toplama deneyimlerine bakıldığında birbiri ile iç içe birçok durumla karşılaşmaktadır. Onlar için atık toplama bir geçim stratejisi olmanın ötesinde bazı bağlamsal zorunlulukların sonucunu ifade etmektedir. Zira "Bourdieu'ya göre, stratejiler bilinçli olarak planlanmış, rasyonel seçimleri ima etmez. Toplumsal yapılar ile bireysel pratikler arasında aracı görevi gören bireyin habitusu tarafından bilgilendirildikleri için genellikle mantıklı ve uygun görünürler (Deffner, 2010, akt. Didero, 2012, 30). Bu çalışmada bireylerin atık toplama deneyimlerinin sosyal ve ekonomik durumlara göre şekil aldıkları görülmüştür. Diğer yandan katı atık toplama işi her ne kadar birçok zorlukları ve olumsuzlukları taşıyor olsa da izlenecek doğru politikalarla katı atık toplayıcılığı organize edilip desteklenebilirse, birçok kişi için istihdam yaratabileceği gibi gelir elde etmenin önemli araçlardan biri olabilir.*

