



Kültür ve İletişim

culture&communication

Yıl: 27 Sayı: 53 (Year: 27 Issue: 53)

Mart 2024 - September 2024 (March 2024 - September 2024)

E-ISSN: 2149-9098



2024, 27(1): 192-203

DOI: 10.18691/kulturveiletisim.1407620

****Research Note****

Sexual Harassment, Gender-Based Discrimination and Mobbing in Newsrooms: Qualitative In-Depth Interviews with Women Journalists in Turkish Media*

Gizem MELEK**

Abstract

This study examines the experiences of women journalists working within the highly patriarchal media industry in Türkiye, which is facing an increase in femicide and gender-based violence. Through in-depth interviews with 12 women journalists working in the industry, this study aims to give voice to women journalists who are subject to discrimination and harassment in newsrooms across Türkiye. The interviews were conducted with journalists aged between 24 and 52, all of whom are based in the three largest cities İstanbul, Ankara, and İzmir. In addition, the journalists are currently working in some of the highly popular media outlets. The findings of the thematic analysis indicate that women journalists encounter a range of challenges within the media industry. These challenges include but are not limited to sexual harassment, glass ceiling, discrimination and mobbing, wage inequality, insufficiency of adequate legal rights, fighting against masculine language in the newsroom, and peer bullying. The results reveal that these issues persist across a variety of categories, highlighting the prevalence of gender discrimination within the media industry. In summary, the study demonstrates that women journalists face a complex array of challenges that require concerted efforts to address and overcome.

Keywords: Women journalists; Turkish media; sexual harassment; gender-based discrimination; mobbing; in-depth interviews.

* Received: 20.12.2023. Accepted: 31.01.2024

** Yaşar University, Department of Radio, Television and Cinema
Orcid no: 0000-0003-4205-8430, gizem.melek@yasar.edu.tr

****Araştırma Notu****

Haber Merkezinde Cinsel Taciz, Cinsiyete Dayalı Ayrımcılık ve Mobbing: Türk Medyasında Çalışan Kadın Gazetecilerle Niteliksel Derinlemesine Görüşmeler*

Gizem MELEK**

Öz

Bu çalışma, kadın cinayetlerinin ve cinsiyete dayalı şiddetin arttığı Türkiye'de ataerkil medya sektöründe çalışan kadın gazetecilerin deneyimlerini incelemektedir. Araştırma, sektörde çalışan 12 kadın gazeteciyle yapılan derinlemesine görüşmeler aracılığıyla, Türkiye genelindeki haber merkezlerinde ayrımcılığa ve tacize maruz kalan kadın gazetecilerin sesini duyurmayı amaçlamaktadır. Röportajlar, İstanbul, Ankara ve İzmir'de bulunan, yaşları 24 ile 52 arasında değişen gazetecilerle gerçekleştirilmiştir. Bahsi geçen gazeteciler Türkiye'deki popüler ana akım medya kuruluşlarında çalışmaktadır. Tematik analizin bulguları, kadın gazetecilerin medya endüstrisinde bir dizi zorlukla karşılaştıklarını göstermektedir. Bu zorluklar arasında cinsel taciz, cam tavan, ayrımcılık ve mobbing, hukuki hakların yetersizliği, ücret eşitsizliği, haber merkezlerinde erkek diline karşı mücadele ve meslektaş zorbalığı yer almaktadır, ancak zorluklar bu konularla sınırlı kalmamaktadır. Sonuçlar, bu sorunların çeşitli kategorilerde devam ettiğini ortaya koymaktadır ve medya endüstrisinde cinsiyet ayrımcılığının yaygınlığını vurgulamaktadır. Özetle mevcut çalışma, kadın gazetecilerin, ele alınması ve üstesinden gelinmesi için ortak çaba gerektiren bir dizi karmaşık zorlukla karşı karşıya olduğunu göstermektedir.

Anahtar Sözcükler: Kadın gazeteciler; Türk medyası; cinsel taciz; cinsiyete dayalı ayrımcılık; mobbing; derinlemesine görüşmeler.

* Geliş tarihi: 20.12.2023. Kabul tarihi: 31.01.2024

** Yaşar Üniversitesi, Radyo, Televizyon ve Sinema Bölümü
Orcid no: 0000-0003-4205-8430, gizem.melek@yasar.edu.tr

Sexual Harassment, Gender-Based Discrimination and Mobbing in Newsrooms: Qualitative In-Depth Interviews with Women Journalists in Turkish Media¹

Introduction

Gender inequality is one of the most important issues in today's workplace and has been the subject of many studies featuring different professions and settings (e.g., Crofts and Coffey, 2017). Previous research has revealed that organizational characteristics and gender stereotypes may play a role in discrimination and how these factors interact to foster gender discrimination in regular office settings (Bobbitt-Zeher, 2011). As a profession that requires 24/7 commitment, journalism sometimes could create uneven power dynamics and be open to exploitation. However, there is a lack of studies investigating women's experiences in newsrooms in such a context. As a country, Türkiye provides an interesting case that has a highly patriarchal media industry, and also femicide and domestic violence are on the rise. Through in-depth interviews with 12 women journalists working in newsrooms across the three largest cities, this study aims to shed light on women's experience in newsrooms and field reporting. These interviews demonstrate that the issues of women journalists are deep within a variety of categories ranging from sexual harassment to emotional and psychological violence including mobbing and other discriminations such as income inequality and peer bullying. The interviews were conducted with journalists aged between 24 and 52 who are currently working in some of the highly popular media outlets ranging from public broadcasters to mainstream media outlets including news agencies, newspapers, TV networks, and online media, as well as, a press agent and former high-ranking managers of one of the Journalists Associations. Their area of expertise includes politics, municipality, economy, environment, news desk correspondence, courthouse, and sports. The interviews in İzmir

¹ As an invited speaker recognized as an expert in Turkish media, the author shared the earlier version of this study at the 'Correcting Images' conference in Leipzig, Germany on 26-29 November 2015 with the title of 'Amongst Discrimination, Harassment, Violence, and News: The Fight of Women Journalists in Turkish Media'. In addition, the findings were later presented at the Communication in the Digital Age (CIDA) 2020 conference in İzmir, Türkiye on 26-28 October 2020 with the title of 'Gender-Based Discrimination and Violence Women Journalists Face in the Turkish Media: Evidence from Qualitative In-Depth Interviews'.

took place face-to-face, while İstanbul and Ankara interviews were conducted mainly through e-mail with further points being discussed over phone calls. Some of the quotes from their interviews are presented anonymously.

Material and Methods

The study employed a qualitative in-depth interview method to collect data. In total 12 interviews were conducted with journalists aged between 24 and 52, all of whom are based in the three largest cities İstanbul, Ankara, and İzmir. When interviewed, these journalists were affiliated with a variety of media outlets, including public broadcasters and well-known mainstream media such as news agencies, newspapers, TV networks, and online platforms. Furthermore, some of the participants who were once active journalists now work as press agents in public institutions as well as union representatives. The study examines the experiences and challenges faced by these journalists in the course of their work, providing valuable insights into the dynamics of the media industry in Türkiye. The study employs a thematic analysis to analyze the interviews to draw conclusions.

Findings and Discussion

Through a thematic analysis of qualitative data, the study seeks to shed light on how women journalists navigate and survive the challenges posed by the current media landscape in Türkiye. The results indicate that women journalists encounter a range of challenges within the media industry and highlight the pervasive nature of gender discrimination leading to mobbing and peer bullying, as well as other issues such as sexual harassment, glass ceiling, absence of proper legal rights, wage inequality, and fighting against masculine language in the newsroom. The following sections include comments from interviewees regarding each emerging theme from the data.

Sexual Harassment: “The male staff call their action on hitting on new coming women staff as ‘give it a shot’”

One of the most important themes that emerged from the data was sexual harassment which is a highly important yet understudied issue within media work settings due to that being not visible or difficult to recognize. The following comments from two separate

interviewees reveal how sexual harassment can become 'normalized' easily in the newsrooms:

"I was exposed to countless harassment by the male staff. I learned that I wasn't alone. Apparently, all male staff hit on new coming women staff or interns and they even named their act 'give it a shot'. As an example, I was studying like a maniac to learn everything in sports journalism when I was faced with a much bigger problem. The deputy news manager in my section was obsessed with me. I don't even remember how many times I said 'No' to him. In the end, I collected all the text messages he sent me at night, and went to complain about him to the news manager and asked him to change my section. However, he didn't care about my complaint and questioned my behavior instead. I had to deal with this deputy manager's obsession for about one year."

"When I was working at a news agency, there was a deputy manager who was infamous for molesting women staff. He used to use his power to offer positions to women in exchange for whatever. One day the deputy manager and another manager invited me to dinner. From my senior colleagues, I learned the context of the invitation was to offer me a regional directorate position in an immoral way. I felt extremely uncomfortable and refused to go out, later I did my best to stay away from him forever. I was always a hard-working and enthusiastic journalist, but it's almost impossible to be noticed with your professional skills. It is humiliating."

According to a Journalists' Association representative, women tend to hide the violence they face and do not report it because they are scared:

"I recently heard about a woman journalist being slapped by a man who owns the workplace, for example. The next day, that journalist went to work as if nothing happened. There are such situations. Imagine there are people who do that (the boss), I couldn't believe it when I heard it from a third person -also a woman- who witnessed the event. She said 'my eyes popped out of their sockets'."

Glass Ceiling: "There is a male-dominated, patriarchal system within the media industry"

Research suggests only 7.8% of women work in decision-making positions in media institutions (TGS, 2018). An interviewee says:

"Even though there are bright women journalists, usually they have hard times even existing in this environment, let alone holding any management positions. Women presenters are seen only as visual material. In serious programs, they are only commissioned as sidekicks. Women correspondents are seen as insufficient and ignorant. The smallest mistakes they make are being judged ruthlessly. As if there is invisible male solidarity and the whole system depends

on the existence of that solidarity. When men get promoted, it's usually not being questioned. However, when women get promoted, people are ready to judge that success and believe that it might not be achieved in an ethical (!) manner.”

Other interviewees suggest that they are subject to certain prejudices and these prejudices are being used as an excuse for the glass ceiling. The following comments were made by two separate interviewees:

“Women are often only given managerial positions in areas considered ‘women-suitable,’ such as magazines, arts, and culture. As an intelligence news desk reporter in Istanbul, I have received comments suggesting I work in easier sections such as paparazzi. Additionally, my feminine appearance along with being an ‘Izmir girl’ has led to assumptions that I am better suited for lighter news.”

“We see women on TV in male-dominated areas like the economy and sports. This is not because of an egalitarian viewpoint, but because the target audience of economy and sports are mainly men. Especially on TV, women correspondents are being marketed to businessmen as an object.”

Legal Rights Challenges: “No legal rights, no labor union for support”

Women journalists grapple with the pressing issue of being excluded from specific legal rights within the journalistic realm, as highlighted by a representative from the Journalists’ Association, who emphasizes that this challenge is particularly pronounced beyond Istanbul.

“I believe the main issue in Izmir is journalists not being registered under the press labor law, linked to challenges in unionization. When positions subject to press labor law open, male staff are often prioritized, and layoffs disproportionately affect women. Women in Anatolia face more significant challenges than those in major cities. Despite the incredible work done by women journalists in the South East of Türkiye under harsh conditions, they lack legal rights, press labor law protection, and face oppression through arrests or detentions. Working in almost voluntary conditions, they endure severe and inhumane circumstances.”

Wage Inequality: “The money women bring home is thought to be a secondary income”

Another important issue connected with the legal rights problem is wage inequality. Several participants suggest there is a strong bias when it comes to the provision of labor and it is never egalitarian. The comments below are from three separate interviewees:

“Male journalists may earn more than their women counterparts, even for the same job. When employers are confronted with this injustice, they often justify it by saying that the male employee has a non-working spouse. However, this should not affect the provision of equal labor and such favoritism is never objective.”

“In society, the money women bring home is thought to be a secondary income. Therefore, sometimes women settle for less money.”

“During workplace reorganizations, women journalists are often the first to be fired under the pretext that males support their families. This implies that women's income is seen as secondary since they are assumed to have a husband.”

Discrimination Leading to Mobbing: “Your smallest mistakes are being made a huge deal and used as a weapon”

Women journalists report that they face a variety of mobbing ranging from having to hide their pregnancy in order not to be fired to employers interfering with their looks. Two comments from different participants below show how employers may bully the women staff:

“Women often hide their pregnancies from management out of fear of getting fired. This is because managers tend to favor men, believing they can use them more efficiently while assuming women may not be able to work night shifts or will eventually need maternity leave.”

“As a woman, I have experienced firsthand how male-dominated work culture can place an unhealthy emphasis on work over family life. When I needed to take a legal leave for my child, my manager would often discredit me, making my smallest mistakes into a big deal. It felt like there was a clear double standard; men were never bullied for fulfilling their paternity tasks, while women are insulted for having a child.”

Another point made by interviewees was how employers are interfering with women staff's outlook, and clothes and how employers pressure women staff to be constantly “beautiful”. Two separate comments support the same argument:

“There are image makers at my workplace (TV), and they take you to the shop, decide all your clothes, including the length of your skirt, no cleavage, etc., make-up style, and even the color of your hair on behalf of you. They told me that I must look more mature and they made me dye my hair. One time just because my knee wasn't covered enough, the management called me and warned me. I was deeply traumatized by that.”

“There is always a ‘you must be beautiful on-screen’ sort of pressure on women. For instance, once I went to report a story on illegal immigrants. Their boat sank and the casualty was 37. I went live on-air wearing cargo pants and a t-shirt. The next day, I received a phone call from the headquarters, they were like ‘Are you a relative of those immigrants, what sort of an outfit was that? We didn’t expect that from you.’ I doubt if they care about the content I delivered.”

Fighting against Masculine Language in the Newsroom: “...they don’t care, they start mocking me and calling me ‘you feminists’”

Media representations and media’s masculine language have been the subject of many research studies. Interviewees say that in the newsrooms there is a strong bias in favor of men when it comes to writing a story and their content is being censored or changed by the male editors and bosses:

“A friend of mine from a news agency was reporting on a murder case that was committed by a woman who had been subjected to violence by her husband for many years. She (the journalist) wrote the headline ‘Woman who had been subjected to systematic violence for many years killed her husband’. So, you want to report using this kind of women point of view, but the editors are male and they don’t like it, they cut it. Her male editor dismissed the part about being abused by her husband and titled it ‘the woman who killed her husband’.”

Two other interviewees say that when they tried to interfere with a masculine language, they are being mocked:

“We learn about the discrimination and usage of masculine language at the university, and that we must avoid using it. However, when you graduate and become a journalist, even if you write down ‘business people’ instead of ‘businessmen’, other colleagues start giggling and mock you.”

“When I see masculine language and warn my colleagues, they don’t care, plus they start mocking me and calling me ‘you feminists’ and laugh.”

Peer Bullying: “...I have a panic attack now”

Outside newsrooms, while reporting there are more issues women journalists face. One important theme that emerged from the qualitative data sheds light on how women journalists are subject to violence by their male peers on the ground. Two interviewees share comments on this issue:

“In political party rallies, I was squeezed and crushed in crowds many times. That’s why I have a panic attack now. One time I was following a political figure, and there was a wall of flesh by cameramen. It was impossible to get through.

They push you away, they elbow you, so I let it go and couldn't get the picture. The violence of your fellow colleagues causes a professional weakness in you. You either have to go very early to the scene or let the possibility of the photo go."

"The most troublesome is the male cameramen and photojournalists. They push you, pull you, and say things like 'oh, you step aside'; loads of violence. I hit them too now and say 'go away'. Cameramen and photojournalists who know me a little, are now stepping aside when they see me."

Domineering attitude by older male colleagues

An interesting anecdote from a young journalist shows another dimension of male peer bullying women journalists may face on the ground. According to this comment, older male journalists may try to establish a domineering and patronizing attitude toward their younger women colleagues:

"As a news desk intelligence reporter in İstanbul, I became a municipality reporter and attended assembly meetings. Upon entering the press room, I encountered a lack of welcome from the older reporters, particularly the eldest, a man around 50 years old. From the onset, he asserted, 'It's not that easy. You'll learn over time. They won't keep you here though.' As the first week progressed and the number of news pieces I covered increased, he publicly confronted me, stating, 'I am the oldest here. I have rules. If you don't comply and try to 'grope us' behind our backs, we will scoop news stories and leave you out. You cannot return here.' Dismissing his authority and objectionable tone, I left, asserting, 'You do not have the right to dictate such terms. Your tone is also inappropriate. I am not obliged to listen to you.' Despite ongoing attempts to perpetuate dominating discourses and attitudes, I resisted for a year. Although he persists in maintaining his stance, my consistent resistance has resulted in silent and uncommunicative days in Parliament. 'Why does he not feel uncomfortable treating me this way?' I pondered this question repeatedly. The answer is rather straightforward. In his eyes, I am a women reporter who is only 25 years old. Consequently, he perceives these factors as entitlements to establish dominance. As a women reporter, I am determined to persistently resist this dominant attitude in every facet of the press industry."

Relationships with News Sources

Lastly, women journalists report that their relationships with news sources may become problematic from time to time. They say that they have many disadvantages compared to their male colleagues and that the industry treats men and women differently. Also, they face many challenges due to being seen as a "second-class citizen". Three separate comments address the issue:

“The business world treats women and male correspondents, differently. You constantly need to reconfirm your respectability as a woman and prove that you are not interested in their wealth or company.”

“Women journalists face challenges in their relationships with news sources. Male reporters and news sources get together at the drinking tables where they get news and scoops. Thus, men get ahead of women reporters.”

“I was tasked by the newspaper to cover the funeral of a businessman attended by the President. All went well until we reached Fatih Mosque. Within the mosque, a designated area for press members was established—directly opposite the congregation, situated behind the funerals, against the wall. My photojournalist companion and I commenced our wait in this space. Subsequently, an individual responsible for the President's security approached and stated, ‘The community does not want to see women. Wait somewhere else.’ I responded, expressing my concern that relocating would hinder my ability to observe and report on the funeral attendees. Compelled to follow the funeral procession from a position behind my male colleagues to avoid expulsion and fulfill my duties, I also sought to prevent the congregation from realizing my gender. This experience amounted to nothing less than the treatment of women as second-class citizens, evident not only within the professional sphere but across all facets of life. It mirrored the same pathos as opting to refer to a woman as a ‘lady’ rather than a ‘woman.’ The aversion to women's presence stemmed from a perception of women solely as sexual objects, emphasizing the broader issue of gender discrimination prevalent in various aspects of society.”

By illuminating the experiences of women journalists in this context, the study contributes to our understanding of the complex dynamics at play within the media industry in Türkiye, and underscores the need for continued attention to these issues in research and practice. The results reveal that these issues persist across a variety of categories, highlighting the prevalence of gender discrimination within the media industry. In summary, the study demonstrates that women journalists face a complex array of challenges that require concerted efforts to address and overcome.

Conclusion

Despite the continual technological advancements in the media industry, an alternative narrative unfolds within its confines. Women journalists, both within and beyond newsrooms, confront persistent challenges such as gender discrimination, mobbing, sexual harassment, and peer bullying, among various other issues. In stark contrast to progress observed in certain facets, the male-dominated nature of the industry

perpetuates impediments for women journalists, and regrettably, these challenges have endured over time without substantial resolution. The need for continued attention to these issues is underscored by the results of this study. Future research could expand upon the present findings by examining the experiences of women journalists in regions beyond the top three largest cities in Türkiye, providing a more comprehensive understanding of the challenges and opportunities for addressing these issues. Such studies could help to inform efforts aimed at fostering a more inclusive and equitable media industry for all journalists, regardless of gender.

References

- Bobbitt-Zeher, Donna (2011). "Gender Discrimination at Work: Connecting Gender Stereotypes, Institutional Policies, and Gender Composition of Workplace." *Gender & Society*, 25(6): 764–786. doi: 10.1177/0891243211424741
- Crofts, Jessica & Coffey, Julia (2017). "Young women's negotiations of gender, the body and the labour market in a post-feminist context." *Journal of Gender Studies*, 26(5): 502-516, doi: 10.1080/09589236.2015.1130610.
- Türkiye Gazeteciler Sendikası (TGS) [The Journalists' Union of Türkiye] (2018). Gazeteci kadınların yaşadığı cinsiyet ayrımcılığı ve şiddet araştırması [Research on gender discrimination and violence experienced by women journalists]. Retrieved from <https://tgs.org.tr/gazeteci-kadinlarin-yasadigi-cinsiyet-ayrimciligi-ve-siddet-arastirmasi/>.

Acknowledgement

The author would like to thank her interviewees for opening up and speaking with complete honesty. For the author, this work holds significant value as she was once a women journalist in Turkish media, personally encountering numerous challenges similar to those pointed out by the participants. These firsthand experiences served as inspiration for conducting the interviews presented in this work. The author would also like to thank her dearest friend and colleague Assoc. Prof. (Ph.D) Defne Günay; and her beloved mother for inspiring her to finish this work.

