



## One Woman, One Life Story and Much to Say about the Contributions of Working in Women's Life

## Bir Kadın, Bir Yaşam Öyküsü ve Çalışmanın Kadın Hayatına Katkıları Hakkında Söylenec Şeyler

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### Abstract

*This study tries to explore a deeper understanding of the facts of women workers. The qualitative approach makes it possible to examine directly the individual experiences of women. By adopting a life story, which provides a connection with the past, this study aims to understand the meaning of work for a woman. With this aim, the life story of Z.S who works as a kitchen staff is interviewed in the study. By examining the individual experience in depth through a life story, this study shows that the meaning of work for a woman is not just gaining a living but also includes how a woman perceives gender beliefs and how the specific events of the past have been reflected in her working life.*

**Keywords:** Gender, the meaning of work, life story, working woman.

### Öz

*Bu çalışma, çalışan kadın gerçeklerine ilişkin daha derin bir anlayış keşfetmeye çalışmaktadır. Nitel yaklaşım, kadınların bireysel deneyimlerini doğrudan incelemeyi mümkün kılar. Bu çalışma, geçmişle bağlantı kurmayı sağlayan yaşam öyküsü yöntemini benimseyerek, kadın için çalışmanın ne anlama geldiğini anlamayı amaçlamaktadır. Bu amaç doğrultusunda çalışmada mutfak elemanı olarak görev yapan Z.S'nin yaşam öyküsünü ele alınmıştır. Bu çalışma, yaşam öyküsü üzerinden, bireysel deneyimi derinlemesine inceleyerek, bir kadın için çalışmanın anlamının sadece geçimini sağlamak olmadığını, aynı zamanda kadının toplumsal cinsiyet inançlarını nasıl algıladığını ve geçmişteki belirli olayların iş hayatına nasıl yansıdığını göstermektedir.*

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Cinsiyet, çalışmanın anlamı, yaşam öyküsü, çalışan kadın.

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## Introduction

In social sciences, working is defined as the actions and efforts that produce goods or services that others will benefit from (Chester & Grossman, 1990, Fox & Hesse-Biber, 1984). However, Höpfl (2007: 402) defines work as any kind of human activity that is carried out by the individual which is compatible with his or her nature, rather than the effort and the action that an individual demonstrates to live. It is therefore important to understand the meaning of work for an individual. Gabriel (2012) argues that due to the increasing competition in the business world at the end of this century, it has become difficult to protect one's physical, moral, and spiritual integrity, and therefore people should produce their own meanings for work (Gabriel, 2012: 4). When the meaning of the work is related to gender, it can be said that studies particularly examining working women are gradually increasing in social sciences. These studies, in general, focus on women's employment and women's career preferences, including changes in economic, family, and social conditions (e.g., Chang, 2003; Whitemarsh et al 2007). Mentioned studies show that, women work for the same reason as men; to gain a living and to function as productive and competent community members (Astin 1984; Chester & Grossman, 1990). In addition, common assumptions underlying these studies are that women work to get rid of boredom, earn extra income for their families, and establish social relations (Grossman & Stewart, 1990). On the other hand, feminist scholars claimed that the meaning of work for women can be different according to the position of the woman in the culture in which she lives and their individual experience (Stewart, 1990). According to this claim, the meaning of work for women is highly influenced by culture, tradition, interpersonal relations, and specific characteristics of society (Altschuler, 2004).

In-depth examinations are required to see how the socio-historical context and connections with other important people in a woman's life shape the meaning she places on her work (Lee, 2006). One of the ways of gaining this deeper understanding is the qualitative research approach which makes it possible to examine directly the individual experiences of women (Chester & Grossman, 1990). According to Portelli (1998), verbal sources not only talk about what people do, but they tell us what people want to do and what they believe in. Personal life stories allow people to express themselves and interpret their own lives (Dansuk, 2000: 22). By adopting the life story method, which provides a connection with the past, this study aims to understand what the meaning of work for women is. Following this aim, the life story of Z.S. who works as a kitchen staff in one of the manufacturing firms is taken for the study. In this study, by adopting the life story of a woman, it is thought that it may be important to examine the stages of a woman's meaning attributed to work during her life.

## Meaning of Work for Women

For centuries, there is an old saying that defines women's lives in different cultures; "A man works until dawn, but a woman can never do" (Henderson & Rannells, 1988:41). In the 1980s, a number of studies were conducted on the

reasons that led women to work (Chester & Grossman, 1990). While one part of these studies, has focused on gender discrimination, sexual harassment, and role conflicts arising from child care (Grossman & Stewart, 1990: 284), another part addressed the changes in economic dependence, family, and social conditions of working women (e.g., Chang, 2003; Whitemarsh et al 2007). What these studies have in common is that women work for almost the same reasons as men, such as earning a living and being productive. (Astin 1984; Chester & Grossman, 1990). On the other hand, there are not many studies on how women internalize work (Chester & Grossman, 1990, Grossman & Stewart, 1990). For instance, Henderson and Rannells (1988) have a different perspective on the meaning of work for women. According to them, even the meaning of the concept of leisure time is different for women and men. Leisure time for women is a phenomenon that connects daily routines that are not easily separated from other aspects of women's daily lives. The oppression of women in society greatly affects their views on work and leisure. The exploitation and subjugation of women are socially so deep that most women have little leisure time (Deem 1982; Henderson & Rannells, 1988; Erkanlı, 2018).

In addition, the meaning of working for women can greatly affect their gender beliefs. Gender refers to the meaning that individuals and societies ascribe to women and men on a biological basis (Eibl, et.al., 2020:580). These ascribed meanings represent shared social and cultural beliefs about men and women where gender roles are defined (Bakan, 1966; Wood & Eagly, 2010) Paid work creates an opportunity for women to gain economic independence and support their families, thereby increasing their belief in equality (Lee, 2006). Many studies have found a positive relationship between female labor force participation and gender beliefs (e.g., Cassidy & Warren 1996; Huber & Spitze 1981; Thornton, et. al., 1983). Lee (2006) mentioned two assumptions. The first assumption is that the meaning of work for women is to gain economic independence and support their families. Under this assumption, it can be argued that working encourages more equitable gender beliefs for women. The other assumption is that work is not the same for all women and looks different from that of males. (Boris & Coles, 2020:2). A woman's relationships in her social and personal life may have different meanings to work. Under this assumption, the relationship between the meaning of a woman's work and her gender belief may become uncertain. Women change gender equality beliefs according to the benefits of gender equality and the cost of classical gender roles (such as being economically dependent on men or discrimination in the labor market). Indeed, researchers have found empirical evidence (e.g., Thornton et al. 1983, Cassidy & Warren, 1996) that there is a positive relationship between women's participation in work and their liberal gender beliefs.

Mary Wollstonecraft, Virginia Woolf, and Betty Friedan, the leading names of feminist scholars, have often highlighted that understanding the meaning of work for women is a key element for understanding sexist social arrangements, equal social status, and power opportunities for women. The meaning of work for women constitutes control over economic resources. On

the other hand, they also emphasized the meaning of work for women includes; self-esteem, sense of purpose and achievement, contribution and participation to the wider public, capacity to arrange non-household social arrangements, independence, and liberation. In addition, feminist scholars argue that women's working experiences depend on the cultural characteristics of workplaces (Stewart, 1990:284). Similarly, in the relevant literature, it is stated that the meaning of work for women is related to their connections with people in their lives such as spouses and children, with timing, and socio-historical and cultural contexts (Lee, 2006).

Perhaps one of the most comprehensive studies, the book entitled "The Experience and Meaning of Work in Women's Lives" (Chester, 1990) challenge the assumption that women work only to support themselves and their families and not be bored. Most of the studies in the book highlight that women's work experience significantly influences their self-esteem and self-efficacy perceptions. According to Chester (1990), to understand the meaning of work for women, it is necessary to know to what extent women are involved in gender discrimination in their working life. As a matter of fact, in most societies, working outside the home seems to violate social values and norms (Stewart, 1990). In the book, there are studies examining the discriminations women face could be social (e.g., Gilkes 1990, Schuster 1990, Tomlinson-Keasey, 1990), institutional (e.g., Grossman 1990, Grossman & Stewart 1990, O'Learly & Ickovics, 1990, Schrodell, 1990) or personal (e.g., Chester, 1990, Schrodell, 1990). The major contribution of the book is that it analyzes the different individual experiences of working women from different cultures. (Chester & Grossman, 1990).

### **Research**

In this study, the life story method reflecting the viewpoint of existentialist phenomenology and the hermeneutic philosophy is adopted (Henderson & Rannells, 1998:43). This view is based on the assumption that reality is produced through social interaction, the researcher is not independent of the subject (Berger & Luckmann, 1966).

The purpose of qualitative methods such as life story is to identify and explore important dimensions of a phenomenon by selecting representative samples, without concern about generalization. (Stewart, 1990). The most important advantages of a life story are to connect the individual with the past and to discover what individuals want to do and what they believe (Portelli, 1998). In the past, this method has been used frequently by feminist researchers who have made significant contributions to the exploration of women's individual experiences. (e.g., Woolf, 1977). Likewise, in this study, the life story method is adopted to understand woman's unique individual experiences regarding the meaning of work. As a matter of fact, "...a single-sample study is very important in understanding a person because he/she can best discover and represent himself/herself in a single situation such as self-expression, decision and movement in human life" (Rittersberger-Tılıç, 2003:2).

In this study, an interview was conducted with Z.S. who has been working as a kitchen staff in a manufacturing firm for about three years. The psychological factors of the person which is part of the life story method have not been overlooked in the research. The interview lasted three and a half hours. The entire conversation was recorded via the tape recorder with the approval of Z.S. Z.S. born on July 15, 1964, in Ankara, Turkey. Approximately 50 years ago, the entire family came from Hasköy to Ankara to settle there.

### **Life Story of Z.S.: If I Go Back to the Past, I Would Cry**

I asked her to tell me about the past. She started talking about the beauty of the house she grew up in “...the house was so beautiful, our house was so beautiful, it was a beautiful house ... there were plenty of wonderful chestnuts came with a bag”. She remembered the house very well, but some troubles came to her mind as she remembers the past. In addition, she remembers other relatives and the slummy environment in which she grows up.

... I do not remember anything beautiful because we were a crowded family, with seven children, as well as aunts, very crowded, my auntie had 7 children, my uncle had 4 children, and my parents always looked after them, when they could not find us in the bed, they started to look for us, so I grew up in such an environment... that my mother supported more of her siblings' children'

Z. S. started primary school and then attended secondary school. But her father had taken her away from secondary school because of the political events that emerged in this period.

... at that time there was politics, the police came and picked us all up, that is, the rightist, the leftist ... then there were certain groups, I was in one of the certain groups, even you did not do anything, they could pick up us for just being in the leftist group, , conflicts and then my dad decided to take away me from the school and registered me to the sewing embroidery courses for about 2 years, but I have never liked it

Although Z. S. did not like to go to the embroidery course she went and met with her husband in front of the school. She got married to him three months later. They started to live in her father-in-law's home and had three boys in this 24-year marriage.

### **What Would Happen If I Didn't Work**

Z.S.'s husband H.S. is 46 years old, graduated from high school, and has passed the university exam but has not attended. H.S. has not yet served in military service when they got married. When H.S. was in his military service, Z.S. was pregnant and was in her husband's parents' house. Z.S. gave birth to a big boy a week before H.S. returned from military service.

...on the third day of our marriage, I was beaten... I have never understood the reason. In the following days, beating continued...

...my eyes were purple, the reason for my current cervical disk hernia is because of these beatings, when he punched me, there was a numbness in my arm and I fainted afterward, then I had a severe pain in my neck...

After H.S. returned from military service, they moved into a house given by her father-in-law. H.S. began to work as a taxi driver with his father. But H.S. did not continue to work. H.S. has not been successful in any other business.

According to Z.S. H.S. had some psychological problems. H.S. was addicted to alcohol and has been given some professional help for a certain period.

...he is a very interesting person, I still do not understand, for example, he drinks alcohol, comes home, we visit his mother's home, but I fainted and my eyes are swollen, then he says he does not want me. Then the next night he comes home again, I think he has a mental disorder, while he was being treated, his doctor asked me that that he could be a schizophrenic, I never thought of it...

Z.S. said that H.S. had worked for a year only in his life. Her mother-in-law and father-in-law have looked at their children. Even his eldest son is living with them now. The older son does not want to see his father. The children are accusing Z.S. of not leaving H.S.

...he said, I do not like my father mom. I asked why, if you had left this man he said, we would have been happy.

Z.S. was quite disgruntled for taking money from her mother-in-law and father-in-law, especially for her children. Z.S. stated that she had to walk from her own house to get food.

...I walked every day to get a piece of bread, why did I walk, because every day to get 1 TL for one loaf of bread, to get 1 TL per day, think like this, They can give me 10 TL? Can't they? Every day I have to go., I have to go because my husband did not work, when I went there, he (her father-in-law) opened his wallet shows me that he did not have any money. Once I was very angry and I told him that, I hope the money you did not give me would be your grave money.

After having been treated for a while, H.S. recovered a bit and began to sell bagels. H.S. has not been successful in this business as well and has begun to sell underwear with Z.S. During this period, Z.S. stated that she could save some money, but later H.S. started to drink again and took the entire money and gambled.

...I am married for 24 years, I did not want these 24 years, I was not happy, now why I do feel happy because I am working.'

Z.S. explained how she starts to work as follows;

...here I know Mrs. Y., the accounting manager, the person who served tea earlier, was off for his annual leave for fifteen days, Mrs. Y. asked me to come, sister of Mrs. Y. is my neighbor, and we have a neighborly conversation with her, I came here and I have worked for fifteen days, everybody was very happy with me, but the earlier employee was back, after fifteen days, they told me "when we needed a worker, we will call you. One and a half years later Mr. S. said to Mrs. Y., let's call Z.S., I did not make any application, I was called, I came in, I went to the kitchen in the morning, I prepared tea, I was tempted and I work here till then.

Z.S. said that she is very satisfied with her bosses at this manufacturing firm and she thought that they always support her.

...it was very nice, so I love my bosses, well their human approaches are very nice ... they are very supportive when you have trouble, good people, really good people, my son went to the military two weeks after I started to work, they helped for my son's travel expense'.

...I was never able to respond because of the man (her husband) in the house before, so I was afraid, I was constantly silent, I was not talking, I could not comment, he always said I did not know, everybody was

hurting me but now I can protect myself, I can organize myself, I can respond here.

When I ask her, "Would you still work now if you have enough money?" she answered as;

... not money, escaping from home, other days of the week what am I going to do at home, I will always be with the guy in the house, what's happening now, I'm leaving in the morning at six a.m. and returning at six p.m., I'm already tired, I eat food, smoke cigarettes, drink my tea, I say goodbye to all and go to bed.

She also stated that working contributed to the family's livelihood in a different form. She said that her bosses allowed her to take home the remaining food in the office at the end of the day.

... 6 or 7 loaves of bread a day, that bread here, for example, can you think, my monthly kitchen expenses for 4 people already 500 TL, expenses for 500 TL, but this is 440 TL now because of the leftover here

With this job, Z.S. has now begun to fulfill the wishes of her children and has even begun to make plans for their future, especially for their marriage.

... for about three years, I got my independence, why, because I work ... first of all, I do not have to go to the mother-in-law for 1 TL, I eat my own food, my children can get whatever they want, now it is very nice, I bought my son's mobile phone, I sent money to my son who is in military service, I sent it, I asked to Mr. E. (her one of boss), I need money for my son, could I take my salary early, he said of course, these are very nice things, things that make me happy... things changed for my children, for example, the dependence on the grandmother was over, because when my son wanted something, she (her mother in law) could say, money was over and the children were frustrated, their grandmother was buying something for them according to her preference, but the children did not like it, he wanted me to go and buy it, how did I do it, I got the tax return, this is an extra money, I am able to save, my children can do something, I can stand on my own feet, I am in this situation for about 3 years, I am happy in my own way ...

### **...Look Around, When I See Women Like Women, I Can't See Myself as a Woman**

Z.S. evaluated gender relations with her colleagues. She stated that she does not like women and that she has better relationships with men in her workplace. In addition, she stated that she was never treated as a woman in her personal life and that she always felt like a man.

...for example, the women around me were pregnant, their husband took them to the hospital, they sent flowers, when I gave birth there was a husband who said that the bastard was born, I can see this woman like a woman but I do not see myself as a woman, do you know what I depend on it, I've always been beaten up, he thought he had a man in front of him, I've been beaten up, I slept on the street, can you think?, it was snowing in the street, grounds are like ice, my foot, there was no shoes, on my head, there was no cardigan, I sat on the street with a nightshirt, don't believe anything, hugging yourself, then I started to see myself as a man... I think that I cannot get along with women at all; I say I do not like them, but it is a fact that I get along with men better than women

In an unpleasant debate in the workplace, her boss asked Z.S. for the responsible staff. Although she was very sorry, she said that she gave the names of women to her boss.

### **... I'm so Afraid, I'm Afraid of the Elevator, of Dark...**

Z.S. stated that she was taken from school by his father because of the 'rightist' and 'leftist' events in Turkey in the 80s.

...The leftist, hurray! revolutionist, we could do all the leftist activism that might come to your mind at that time, when we stay in the police station for 11 days, think of a small toilet in an enclosed place, those days that remained me... I was sixty-seven kg when I go in, when I went out I was forty-seven kg, I went out to the court, I accepted all the charges out of fear....

The place where Z.S. was interrogated was dark and enclosed, Z.S. said that she was afraid of dark, loud, and noisy surroundings.

... I'm so afraid, I'm afraid of the elevator, of dark ... I'm terrified, I am so afraid that someone is walking up the stairs loudly... and the scream of someone suddenly..'

Although Z.S. has expressed positive changes in her working life in recent years, it is clear that she has had traces of the past. Aside from her past fears, the husband she now has to live with is the scariest thing in her life. She said that she is afraid of being beaten up again because her husband could turn into a monster when he drinks. In addition, it is also among the fears of Z.S. that their children hate their fathers and even want to hurt him.

... nowadays, my eldest son and the little one say 'you should not have allowed him, so they tend to hurt him, I am a mother how can I let such a thing ... I do not want them to go to prison...

### **Discussion and Conclusion**

In the current study, by taking into account the social interaction with Z.S. and her narrative, it was attempted to discover the meaning of work for a woman. First of all, it is possible to say that with working, there are obvious economic changes in her life. While working, she feels free in the economic sense, able to fulfill the wishes of her children, and has become almost the primary breadwinner of the household. This supports the claim of feminist theorists as an important aspect of working for women to provide control over economic resources. Giving economic meaning to working for a woman is one of the most common consequences. On the other hand, an in-depth study of individual experience through life stories shows that we can include other meanings such as being moral support to family (Bertaux & Thompson, 1997).

Kalaycıoğlu and Rittersberger-Tılıç, (2002) highlighted the contributions of some forms of social solidarity to cope with poverty. The contribution is defined as the family pool formed by the contributions of family members. In the case of Z.S., this contribution is provided by Z. S's father-in-law. However, it should be emphasized the psychological effects of this support on the family members. It is understood from the interview with Z.S. that this contribution was presented in a humiliating manner. In addition, during the interview, Z.S. answered "yes" when she was asked, "Would you still work if you do not need



money?" She also mentioned that working is no longer for money, but to escape from her father and mother-in-law and her husband.

According to Bertaux and Thompson (1993:15), the possibility of linking an individual's past through a life story makes it possible to do a personal self-analysis. In this study, it is obvious that the perception of self-esteem has changed as Z.S. started to work. Earlier studies (Barnett & Baruch, 1985; Verbrugge, 1982) investigated the psychological effects of employment on women and found repeated positive relationships between employment and self-esteem. Z.S. has often said that her self-esteem increases with working. On the other hand, the increase in self-esteem is reflected not only in the working environment but also in the home. Z.S. said that she could not answer anything or comment on any subject because she was afraid of her husband before. But by working now, she reached a situation where she can protect herself.

This study also highlights the relationship between the meaning of work for women and women's gender beliefs (Huber & Spitze 1981; Lee, 2006; Thornton, et al., 1983). At this point, the possibility to connect the individual with the past through life stories allows the revealing of women's gender beliefs. Z.S. mentioned that she had not been treated like a woman throughout her whole life and, she felt a sense of opposition to women in the working environment. Z.S. clearly stated that she gets along better with men in the workplace. The fact that Z.S. was not treated as a woman led her to feel "I am not like her". It is clear that her experience greatly influenced Z. S's gender beliefs. In addition, the study draws attention to self-efficacy beliefs. Because self-efficacy belief is very important in motivating certain behaviors (Gist & Mitchell, 1992). Eibl et al., (2020) associated the concept of employee voice with self-efficacy and stated that such behaviors challenge the status quo and there is strong empirical evidence that self-efficacy beliefs are positively associated with proactive behaviors such as employee voice. It is seen that Z.S.' working life increased her self-efficacy belief and she expressed what she could not express before her working life, with this self-efficacy belief she gained.

Feminist theorists (e.g., Wollstonecraft, 1978; Woolf, 1974) argue that the meaning of the work for women is different because of the individual's experience and the location of the woman in the culture (Stewart, 1990). According to this claim, the meaning of work for a woman is highly influenced by culture, tradition and custom, interpersonal relations, and collective specific characteristics (Altschuler, 2004). Özen et al., (2006), investigated the meaning of work under four themes in the Turkish social context. These are; serving the public, livelihood, promotion, and survival. Serving the public means working as a tool to serve the community. The concept of livelihood refers to working for the realization of the most important purposes of life, such as marrying and raising children. Working for promotion is reflected as a means of achieving individual goals, including values such as reaching a high standard of living or reaching the desired property. Finally, the concept of survival also includes the concept of livelihood is characterized as working under pressure because of the tension between the consumption of the liberal system and the low-income level. This study shows that when there is a woman in question, we could find

another understanding of working such as 'independence'. Although working for Z.S. means survival and livelihood, it also means independence.

In conclusion, this study shows how a woman's life story fits within the context of paid work. Of course, it is not possible to draw a generalizable conclusion from the life history of only one woman. As stated earlier, rather than producing generalizable knowledge, it is assumed that each experience is unique and can give us clues about social phenomena. Thus, Z. S's life story shows us how the meaning of paid work shapes a woman's life.

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