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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Women in the Gastronomy Arena: Gender-Based Experiences Encountered

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ABSTRACT

In this study, the difficulties experienced by female kitchen workers in their profession due to their gender were examined. In the research, which specifically questioned sexual harassment and glass ceiling syndrome in the workplace, a phenomenological approach was adopted and a qualitative research method was preferred. In this context, various questions examining the obstacles in question were asked to female employees employed in the kitchen departments of three different four- and five-star accommodation establishments operating in Kuşadası. The findings indicate that women are partially hindered due to their gender. In addition, three of the participants stated that they were harassed in various ways (verbal or sexual), and one of them stated that he witnessed it in some way, even though he was not harassed. In line with the results obtained from the interviews conducted with nine participants, various inferences were made and various suggestions were presented to sector representatives and senior managers.



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1. Introduction

While traditional gender roles have increasingly collapsed in recent years, significant changes are also taking place in the business world. As a reflection of this change, commercial kitchens are no longer places where only male chefs and cooks perform. Women leave their mark with their mastery and passion in these places where taste and creativity dominate. In a field where stereotyped norms and prejudices are challenged, the presence of women in kitchens not only affects food culture but also deeply affects social perceptions.

Kitchens, which were traditionally considered a male-dominated field, now attract attention with the mastery and creativity of women. Female chefs are responsible not only for their meals; they also leave their mark with their leadership. This situation deeply affects the understanding of taste and gender dynamics in kitchen environments. Understanding the factors behind the increasing participation of women in professional kitchens requires not only culinary culture; it also helps understand the evolution in the business world. The role of women in commercial kitchens is expanding the boundaries of the art of cooking while also challenging gender norms.

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Although sexual harassment at work is a common problem (Mohamad & Suhaimi, 2020), it can sometimes remain an unspoken problem for various reasons. Gender issues in commercial kitchens are compounded not only by food preparation skills and understanding of taste but also by gender identity. Sexual harassment against women in the business world affects not only individuals; it is also a problem that threatens the health of an entire organization. Harassment not only negatively impacts individuals' mental health but also has the power to shape the careers of female professionals and restrict their potential for advancement.

It's also possible that there is an actual glass ceiling syndrome in the kitchens of lodging establishments. This is because women are underrepresented in management, their administrative skills aren't properly evaluated, wage policies are based on gender, and job opportunities are shaped on a more fundamental level (Koç & Uşaklı, 2022). Cases of exclusion or harassment of female employees in the workplace due to gender frequently come to the fore. This situation creates concerns about women's entry or continuity into working life (Balkır, 2015; Öz et al., 2020).

In this study, the steps taken towards gender equality in the world of gastronomy and the challenges they face will be explored through the experiences of female employees in commercial kitchens.

1.1. Conceptual Framework

1.1.1. Gastronomy and commercial kitchens

Kitchens are designated spaces where the cooking process, often considered a form of artistic expression, takes place. These areas include the tools and equipment required for the preparation of food and beverages required for human nutrition. In addition, kitchens serve as areas where prepared foods are stored and, in some cases, facilitate the presentation and consumption of these foods (Aktaş & Özdemir, 2007).

Throughout human history, societies have engaged in eating and drinking activities. This situation has significantly affected the formation, structure, and organization of civilizations (Standage, 2018). Gastronomy is a combination of the Greek words *gastro* (stomach) and *nomos* (rules). Gastronomy is a branch of science that guides where, how, and when to consume food and beverages (Santich, 2004). In addition to meeting people's physical needs, food also affects their socialization, sensory and emotional states, and introduction to different cultures (Birdir & Akgöl, 2015). Gastronomy is not only the act of consuming food; it also includes preparation, cooking, presentation, and final consumption (Kivela & Crotts, 2006). Numerous definitions have been documented in the literature, from the beginning of the concept of gastronomy to the present day. Considering the similarities between these definitions, gastronomy can be described as a scientific and artistic discipline that deals with the preparation and presentation of

food and is also a reflection of various cultures (Sarıışık & Özbay, 2015).

In the context of contemporary globalization trends, there is a remarkable shift in the approach of food and beverage businesses to provide services according to individuals' culinary preferences, social positions, and cultural backgrounds. These venues now prioritize the alignment of kitchen structures with specific thematic elements and invest significant financial resources to increase both the aesthetic appeal and functional efficiency of kitchen environments (Fine, 1996). With the industrial revolution and women's participation in business life, habits of eating outside the home or consuming ready-made food products have become common. This has enabled commercial kitchens to become widespread, thus creating a wide employment area.

Although the concept of a commercial kitchen often brings to mind kitchens in hotels, it is important to note that commercial kitchens cannot be limited to hotel businesses only. Sezgin and Ünlüönen (2011) classified cafes, cafeterias, restaurants, and similar institutions, especially restaurants, within the scope of commercial kitchen classification.

Individuals working in the field of cooking constitute an important component of the overall kitchen structure. The number, responsibilities, and qualifications of kitchen staff depend on several considerations, including the size, category, organizational framework, geographical location, physical configuration, and equipment of the establishment. Kitchen staff consists of many roles, such as head chef, section chefs, cooks, assistant cooks, dishwashers, and square attendants. The allocation of duties and tasks within the kitchen organizational structure depends on the unique roles individuals assume. Effective coordination and collaboration between kitchen team members is essential to optimize efficiency and ensure high-quality food production (Önçel, 2020).

1.1.2. Gender-based discrimination in business life

Gender-based discrimination has been a persistent problem that spans historical periods and is prevalent in contemporary society. Discrimination refers to any behavior that hinders individuals' entitlements, freedoms, and fair access to opportunities. Discrimination in organizational settings can occur as a result of demographic characteristics such as age, gender, and ethnicity, as well as other factors such as hierarchical placement and tenure. However, the type of prejudice that is most common and causes the most harmful consequences at the individual level is gender-based discrimination. Differential allocation of opportunities, resources, and incentives based on gender indicates the existence of gender-based discrimination (Yörük Karakılıç, 2019). Gender-based occupational discrimination refers to the perception that some occupations are inherently suitable for a particular gender. Therefore, it is seen that individuals' job

performances may differ according to gender. There is empirical data showing that throughout the job selection process, biases arising from social assumptions about gender perceptions of certain occupations play a significant role in perpetuating discriminatory practices. In addition, in the gender-based personnel selection process, not only the biological sex of the candidate but also their perceived masculinity or femininity levels are taken into account. Therefore, it can be argued that providing any data regarding a candidate's perceived gender has the potential to influence the assessment of the candidate's suitability for a particular employment position (Hareli et al., 2008).

Occupational discrimination is perpetuated through the use of sexist stereotypes, resulting in hiring choices based on the perceived suitability of a particular job for men or women. Therefore, gender-based discrimination can be among the determining factors in the recruitment decision process. The existence of gendered norms regarding paid work and domestic labor can lead to inequalities in the chances of men and women assuming senior management roles. Sometimes, women may be assigned lower salary levels than men. In this particular framework, the primary consequence of occupational segregation is the fragmentation of pay systems and the perpetuation of gender-based income inequalities (Kirshmeyer, 1998). The "alienation" of women may be one of the ways that gender discrimination is reflected in corporate culture. According to a study, in institutional environments where gender discrimination against women is common, women are treated as "foreigners" by men (Güler, 2005).

Gender discrimination is most commonly seen in employment, wage, and promotion situations. Some jobs are labeled as being for men or women by nature. This assumption is that one gender has only certain job-related characteristics, while the other gender lacks these characteristics entirely. In addition, prejudices against women in the workplace stem from the idea that women cannot prioritize their careers sufficiently due to family obligations or that they will work part-time jobs until they get married. In addition to discrimination in the workplace, prejudice can also arise when men and women are paid differently for doing the same job. Despite all their efforts, women may encounter a misleading glass ceiling that prevents them from advancing to senior management positions (Nasir, 1997). "Invisible woman syndrome" is a major issue affecting women in company culture. In male-dominated work environments, women are seen as domesticated, emotional, and irrational, while men are seen as possessive, controlling, rational, and logical thinkers.

As a result, women are perceived to be suitable for less valuable jobs than men in the organizational culture where non-organizational cultural values within the organization are maintained. Therefore, it can be said that due to this perception, female employees often find themselves working on low-level

projects, and their opinions are not taken into account (Güler, 2005).

1.1.3. Workplace harassment

The United States is where the concept of "sexual harassment" first emerged. In 1975, American feminists were the first to use this expression. It quickly gained popularity, attracted media attention, and gained significant legal importance as a result of many court decisions. Later, it reached Europe and Japan, and over time, it became a current concept all over the world (Saguy, 2003). Sexual harassment is sexual pressure on a person to make sexual advances and requests against their will, and it occurs within an unequal power dynamic. According to Fitzgerald et al. (1995), sexual harassment is a behavior that involves three interrelated but conceptually distinct dimensions. These include gender harassment, unwanted sexual attention, and sexual pressure. Gender harassment includes a variety of verbal, physical, and symbolic behaviors that demonstrate a hostile and degrading attitude towards women. Sexual remarks or gestures, suggestive jokes, the display of sexual images, gender-based behavior, threats, or hostility are examples of such behavior that is intended to humiliate the woman rather than express sexual or romantic desires (Page et al., 2016). Unwanted sexual attention refers to unwanted, aggressive, and one-sided verbal and nonverbal behavior. Unwanted sexual attention consists of sexual expressions, intentional touching, aggression, and insistence on informal communication that the recipient perceives as unwanted, untrustworthy, and offensive. Sexual pressure is defined as the use of social power to achieve sexual intercourse (Herrera et al., 2018).

Physical, verbal, non-verbal, or visual behavior can all be considered sexual harassment. Looking intently or lustfully at someone's body is an example of nonverbal behavior. Rubbing or touching someone can be considered physical harassment behavior. Sexually explicit conversations are used to demonstrate verbal behavior, while using an offensive computer screen saver is an example of visual sexual harassment. In its most severe form, sexual harassment can take the form of rape or unwanted sexual jokes. The main feature of sexual harassment is that the person exposed does not want this action. Otherwise, laws against sexual harassment do not impede or restrict people's social interactions while they are living together (Yeşiltaş, 2005).

Sexual harassment is highly susceptible to individual perception, and many factors can influence how it is determined whether a behavior is abusive. Additionally, although men and women agree that behavior such as bribery or sexual assault is harassment, women are more likely to view these subtle behaviors as harassment (Golden et al., 2001). According to Eurofound's Fourth European Working Conditions Survey report, 10% of female employees in the Czech Republic, 7% in Norway, 6% in Turkey and Croatia, 5% in Denmark, Sweden,

Lithuania, and the United Kingdom, and less than 1% in Italy, Spain, Malta, and Cyprus reported having been sexually harassed (Unur & Şanlı, 2017).

Sexual harassment in the workplace creates an environment of fear and mistrust. Sexual harassment in the workplace must be addressed because it increases the victim's fear and causes serious physical, psychological, and emotional difficulties (Steiner & Wooldredge, 2015; Apell et al., 2019). Victims of sexual harassment often experience negative consequences such as resignation, absenteeism, interpersonal disagreements with co-workers, decreased work productivity, increased stress levels, and the intention to quit (Merkin & Shah, 2014).

1.1.4. Glass ceiling syndrome

Although there are many women employees at middle levels in organizations, the number of women in upper management is very low (Oakley, 2000). Looking at recent research on the lack of female employees in senior management, it is noteworthy that women are less represented in senior management, and even if they reach senior management, they are paid less than men (Pichler et al., 2008). Many studies have been conducted to determine the existence of the glass ceiling. Most research results have shown that female managers in the private sector only advance to the middle level and stay there. When looked at in terms of management levels, negative results are noteworthy in terms of the number of female managers. This supports the claim that there is a glass ceiling that prevents women from climbing the corporate ladder (Zel, 2002).

The concept of "ceiling" indicates that women face an upper limit on how high they can rise in the organizational ladder. The term "glass" describes the transparency and thinness of this barrier that the person cannot see (Barreto et al., 2009). The glass ceiling is defined as the obstacles that prevent women from reaching the most powerful, most prestigious, and high-paying jobs. The "glass" metaphor expresses an invisible barrier because there are no obvious obstacles to women reaching the top professionally (Longo & Strahley, 2008). The "glass ceiling" metaphor refers to the existence of an impermeable barrier that prevents women's vertical movements. Women can only be promoted below this barrier; they cannot go beyond it (Baxter & Wright, 2000). This situation creates organizational and perceptual barriers that prevent women from moving up the corporate ladder and reaching senior management (Weyer, 2006). Glass ceiling syndrome is a multidimensional phenomenon that includes organizational, gender, and social stratification factors (Kwaku Ohemeng & Adusah-Karikari, 2015).

The glass ceiling also draws attention to women's feminine qualities, such as being soft-spoken, loving, and compassionate. It can be stated that they cannot take a tough attitude like men in organizations (Adams & Funk, 2012). Fulfilling domestic

and family obligations often creates obstacles for women. A large proportion of working women are single, divorced, or have fewer children as a result of their increased participation in employment (Guy & Schumacher, 2009). The social belief that men are smarter and more competent than women harms women's reputation in business life. In this context, the woman's colleagues or subordinates may also exhibit an attitude that questions this competence. In fact, in some societies, it may be considered humiliating or shameful for men to receive instructions from women (Connell, 2006). Women in senior management positions are also perceived as less proactive and less courageous. They are less likely to assume leadership positions within the organization and make ambiguous decisions (Bowles et al., 2007; Tan, 2008).

2. Methodology

In this study, phenomenology, one of the qualitative research methods, was preferred. This is due to awareness of the phenomenology involved. However, it focuses on facts about which there is no in-depth and comprehensive information. Phenomenology is a research methodology suitable for studies that aim to investigate situations that are neither completely unfamiliar nor predictable (Jasper, 1994). Rather than emphasizing the process of experience, phenomenology focuses on how individuals, societies, or communities convey the meanings they derive from their experiences and the meaning these experiences leave on people. It is the interpretation of the essence of events without limitation of space or time (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). Qualitative research methodology was used to find in-depth and exploratory answers to the interview questions (Storey, 2007). The method used in the study was adapted from Arslan and Kendir (2020), Arslan et al. (2023), and Özçelik Bozkurt (2023). In this study, the potential difficulties that female employees of Kuşadası accommodation establishments may encounter in the work environment are examined, and how they make sense of these experiences is revealed. Each interview took place over the phone and lasted for about 10 minutes.

The questions asked of the participants within the scope of the research are as follows:

Q1. Do you think working in the kitchen is a disadvantage for women?

Q2. Do you think that your physical characteristics are a disadvantage when working in the kitchen?

Q3. Have you been verbally or sexually harassed at work?

Q4. Do you plan to continue in your profession?

3. Findings

3.1. Demographic Characteristics of Participants

The demographic characteristics of the participants in the research are listed in Table 1.

According to the information in the table, the participants are employed in different age groups and in different sections of the kitchen department.

Table 1. Demographic information of participants.

Participant	Age	Department Division
P1	23	Breakfast
P2	34	Hot Kitchen
P3	29	Hot Kitchen
P4	42	Cold Kitchen
P5	22	Breakfast
P6	35	Patisserie
P7	24	Patisserie
P8	23	Cold Kitchen
P9	25	Cold Kitchen

Table 2. Responses of participants to the questions.

	P1	P2	P3	P4	P5	P6	P7	P8	P9
Q1	No, I don't think gender affects professions. Everyone can do any job.	I think women's culinary disadvantages vary depending on the department. In my opinion, women manage the patisserie and men manage the hot parts.	I don't think women have a disadvantage in the kitchen, but I work in Turkey, and I think women are psychologically and physically abused.	I don't think there is a disadvantage for women working in the kitchen. I think there should be no gender discrimination.	Working in the kitchen can be a disadvantage for women. The businesses I work in have a large male population, so men see themselves as stronger than women.	I don't think so because, although the technology currently used reduces manpower, it makes work easier, regardless of men and women, and eliminates any disadvantages that may arise.	I don't think working in the kitchen is a disadvantage for women. Because professions have no gender.	I don't think working in the kitchen is a disadvantage for women.	I think there is a disadvantage for women in this patriarchal society, but it shouldn't be.
Q2	No. Because I think there is an equal and logical distribution of work in the kitchen, therefore my physical characteristics are not at a disadvantage.	There was no disadvantage for me in terms of physical characteristics in the kitchen, but I witnessed that my friends had problems.	Yeah, I think. If you are overweight, lose weight; if you were skinny, it was said to gain weight.	Yes, some of my physical characteristics had disadvantages. Since I am not very tall, I had difficulty reaching the shelves above.	I think my physical characteristics are disadvantageous from time to time. For example, not being able to reach the shelves above or carrying heavy things	No I do not think.	I think my physical characteristics are sometimes a disadvantage when working in the kitchen.	There are times when my physical characteristics are a disadvantage when working in the kitchen.	No I do not think.
Q3	No, I was not verbally or sexually harassed.	No, I was not verbally or sexually harassed.	Yes, I was verbally abused.	No, I was not abused.	I have not been verbally or sexually harassed personally in the work environment, but I have witnessed people being verbally harassed around me.	No, I was not verbally or sexually harassed.	No, I was not verbally or sexually harassed.	Yes, I was verbally abused.	Yes, I was verbally and sexually abused.
Q4	Because I love doing it, I plan to continue in the future.	I do not plan to continue in the profession. I turned to the teaching profession.	I plan to continue my career as an academician.	Yes, I am thinking of continuing in the profession.	I plan to continue in my profession despite everything.	I love my job and I plan to continue.	I love my job and I plan to continue.	I am thinking of continuing in the profession.	I am thinking of continuing my career as a teacher.

According to the data in Table 2, the first question was, "Do you think working in the kitchen is a disadvantage for women?" Three out of nine participants answered "yes," citing various reasons. Therefore, six participants think that working in the kitchen is not a disadvantage for women. The second question was, "Do you think your physical characteristics are a disadvantage when working in the kitchen?" Six participants answered "yes" for various reasons. Three participants stated that physical characteristics do not pose any problems for women in the work environment. The third question was, "Have you been subjected to verbal or sexual harassment in the

work environment? One of the participants answered, "Yes, I was verbally and sexually harassed." Another two participants answered, "Yes, I was verbally harassed." Another participant answered, "I was not, but I witnessed my colleagues being verbally harassed." The fourth question was, "Do you plan to continue in your profession?" Three of the participants answered "no." One of the participants responded, "I think of continuing despite everything."

4. Conclusion and Recommendations

In this study, which examined the difficulties faced by female kitchen workers, some participants stated that being a woman was not a disadvantage, while others argued that their gender was a disadvantage. In addition to the participants who stated that their physical characteristics pose a problem, especially in reaching high shelves, one participant pointed out that there were criticisms regarding their appearance. One of the participants stated that he was personally subjected to verbal harassment, and another participant stated that he witnessed the verbal harassment of other friends. The majority of participants stated that they were considering continuing in the profession. The fact that employees tend to stay in the profession suggests that the kitchen departments of accommodation establishments provide a more sustainable employment area compared to other departments. Because the general structure of the tourism sector has a structure in which the tendency to stay in the profession decreases over the years (Özçelik Bozkurt & Çökelsen Alkış, 2020).

The difficulties experienced by women due to their physical characteristics (not being able to reach high shelves, etc.) are not made to be felt as a deficiency by other male employees or superiors, directly or indirectly, which will ensure that women do not perceive this situation as a negative feature. This emphasizes that the struggle for gender equality is not limited only to social and cultural norms, but also includes elements such as physical infrastructure and ergonomics. Understanding these challenges and creating solutions demonstrates the need for a more comprehensive approach to gender equality in kitchens.

Participant responses show that the problem of sexual harassment in kitchens covers a wide spectrum. While participants who talked about their experiences of being harassed emphasized the seriousness of the problem in this area, witnessing shows that the problem is not only an individual but also a social issue. This diversity shows that the struggle for gender equality requires not only focusing on the individual's experience but also looking at the interactions around him from a broad perspective.

The occurrence of sexual harassment in the workplace causes significant health and psychological difficulties for affected employees, thus creating a challenging scenario for both individuals and businesses involved. As individuals' commitment to their jobs decreases, the level of competition in the sectors in which companies operate also decreases. Harassment significantly reduces individuals' job happiness and strongly affects their tendency to leave work. Additionally, as a result of harassment, individuals may experience psychological effects, including stress-related reactions such as anxiety and depression, as well as physical health problems such as headaches, gastrointestinal disorders, and sleep disorders (Fitzgerald et al., 1997). Previous research has

revealed that female employees working in different branches of the tourism industry and in different positions are often subjected to systematic harassment cases and are exploited through pressure or in exchange for pay (Cheung et al., 2018; Ram, 2018). In their study on intern students, Unur and Şanlı (2017) found that male students were subjected to more harassment than female students.

This research offers important opportunities for accommodation business managers and relevant ministries to take effective steps in combating gender-based challenges. Hospitality managers should establish transparent policies and regularly update these policies to combat sexual harassment and gender-based barriers among their employees. They can also raise staff awareness by implementing training programs that support gender equality. Relevant ministries should inspect businesses in the sector and strengthen legal regulations on gender equality. They should also encourage businesses to take greater responsibility for addressing gender-based challenges in the sector by creating a comprehensive strategy. These efforts can make a significant contribution to creating a fair, equality-based working environment in the hospitality industry.

Conflict of Interest

The authors have no conflict of interest to declare.

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