

EXPERIENCES OF PROFESSIONAL WOMEN WHO LEFT WORK
AFTER BECOMING MOTHERS, THE CASE OF TURKEY

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ABSTRACT

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This study aims to understand why professional women leave work after becoming mothers in Turkey. The concept of opting out is used throughout the study to refer to mothers' experiences of leaving work while making a critique of personal choice. Professional women were chosen as a target group to contribute to the debates on opting out in Turkey. Drawing on the data obtained from semi-structured in-depth interviews with 16 participants who were working in professional and managerial positions before leaving their careers, this study examined: (I) the reasons behind professional women leaving work after becoming mothers, (II) the implications of leaving work on mothers' lives and (III) the relationship between leaving work and motherhood ideology. The findings indicate various social, cultural and structural reasons behind these mothers' leaving work. Especially in Turkey, where the gendered division of labour in unpaid domestic and care work and mothers' socially constructed role as primary caregivers are reinforced by the existing state policies and the motherhood ideology within and beyond the family, work-life conflict is a

serious issue for professional women, making them question their priorities over paid work and motherhood. A working mother's guilt that later transforms into nostalgia for working life signals contradictions experienced by women as professional workers and mothers. While the participants do not embrace traditional values regarding motherhood and women's work, leaving work and adopting intensive motherhood becomes a form of identity construction for professional women and a strategy against the barriers in the labour market and work-life conflict.

Keywords: motherhood, opting out, professional women, Turkey, work-life balance

ÖZ

ANNE OLDUKTAN SONRA İŞTEN AYRILAN PROFESYONEL MESLEK SAHİBİ KADINLARIN DENEYİMLERİ, TÜRKİYE ÖRNEĞİ

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Yüksek Lisans, Toplumsal Cinsiyet ve Kadın Çalışmaları Bölümü

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Bu çalışma, Türkiye’de profesyonel meslek sahibi kadınların anne olduktan sonra neden işten ayrıldıklarını anlamayı amaçlamaktadır. İşten ayrılma kavramı, çalışma boyunca bir kişisel seçim eleştirisi yaparak anne olan kadınların işten ayrılma deneyimlerine atıfta bulunmak için kullanılmıştır. Türkiye’deki işten ayrılma tartışmalarına katkı sağlamak üzere profesyonel meslek sahibi kadınlar hedef grup olarak seçilmiştir. İşlerinden ayrılmadan önce profesyonel ve yönetici pozisyonlarda çalışmış 16 katılımcı ile yapılan yarı yapılandırılmış derinlemesine görüşmelerden elde edilen verilerden yola çıkılarak hazırlanan bu çalışmada; (I) profesyonel kadınların anne olduktan sonra işten ayrılma nedenleri, (II) işten ayrılmanın annelerin yaşamları üzerindeki etkileri ve (III) işten ayrılma ile annelik ideolojisi arasındaki ilişki incelenmiştir. Bulgular, bu annelerin işten ayrılmasının ardındaki çeşitli sosyal, kültürel ve yapısal nedenlere işaret etmektedir. Hane içi ücretsiz emek ve bakım emeğindeki toplumsal cinsiyete dayalı işbölümünün ve annelerin bakım emeğini sağlaması gereken birincil kişiler olarak atfedilmesinin, mevcut devlet politikaları ve annelik ideolojisiyle pekiştirildiği Türkiye’de, iş-yaşam çatışması profesyonel

kadınlar için ciddi bir sorun olup onların ücretli çalışma ve annelik konusundaki önceliklerini sorgulamalarına neden olmaktadır. Çalışan annelerin suçluluk duygusunun daha sonra iş hayatı için nostaljiye dönüşmesi, kadınların profesyonel çalışan ve anne olarak karşılaştıkları çelişkilerin sinyallerini vermektedir. Katılımcılar annelik ve kadının çalışmasıyla ilgili geleneksel değerleri kabul etmezken, işten ayrılma ve ‘yoğun anneliğin’ benimsenmesi, profesyonel kadınlar için bir kimlik inşa biçimi ve onların işgücü piyasasındaki engellere ve iş-yaşam çatışmasına karşı geliştirdikleri bir strateji olarak ortaya çıkmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: annelik, işten ayrılma, iş-yaşam dengesi, profesyonel kadın, Türkiye

To my mother,

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AKP	Justice and Development Party
EIGE	European Institute for Gender Equality
GWSRC	The Kadir Has University Gender and Women's Studies Research Center
UN	United Nations
WLB	Work-Life Balance

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

It seemed to me that the devaluation of women in other spheres and the pressures on women to validate themselves in maternity deserved exploration. I wanted to examine motherhood –my own included– in a social context, as embedded in a political institution: in feminist terms. (Rich, 1986)

1.1. Introduction

Motherhood, far from being an individual issue for women, is a social and political issue. Motherhood as an institutionalised ideology is deeply rooted within society in general, thus; in some instances, it becomes a central issue for feminists in challenging the patriarchal system. That is why O'Reilly (2004) criticised “the patriarchal institution of motherhood that is male-defined and controlled and is deeply oppressive to women” (p. 2). Especially in Turkey, from the past to the present, the patriarchal myth that motherhood is instinctive is strongly diffused in the society and women's role as mothers and caregivers is deeply rooted in the country's conservative culture. Although conservatism has been a constant feature of the Turkish welfare state, after the Justice and Development Party (AKP) regime, we can see a new turn as the combination of neoliberalism and conservative-Islamic ideology in which a new familialism that reinforces the existing male breadwinner and female homemaker model emerged (Buğra, 2012; Dedeoğlu, 2013). While we could indeed argue that this was the case for the past decade, this study also has the potential to reveal whether such a pattern is still relevant in Turkey today to discuss its implications on women's lives. As for the relationship between neoliberalism and motherhood ideology, women's position is critical because women's reproductive labour, both as care work and unpaid domestic work, is the safety net that ensures the maintenance of the

neoliberal-capitalist system. Moreover, the myths attached to the motherhood ideology reinforce the gendered division of labour in the household and public/private dichotomy, which overall serve to increase gender inequalities. All in all, the primary standpoint of this thesis is based on the idea that motherhood is a social institution rather than simply a biological issue, which has been the central tendency for motherhood literature in feminist scholarship.

The myths attached to motherhood impose ideas such as becoming a mother is an undeniable part of being a woman or that mothers must sacrifice everything to become good mothers. These may result in women experiencing conflict in reconciling work and family. Correspondingly, there are also other myths that create a dichotomy between mothers, so-called mommy wars, which impose a comparison or a competition between working mothers and stay-at-home mothers. In this understanding, mothers' working is proposed as an alternative to the ideology of intensive motherhood (Dillaway & Pare, 2008; Akyol & Arslan, 2020). Thus, this may create a social contradiction between their identities as workers and mothers through socially constructed roles.

Regarding how motherhood ideology operates in the lives of mothers, the existing literature mainly covers the issues regarding women currently in the workplace or stay-at-home mothers. While these issues are essential, and we will continue to discuss them, it is also crucial to address the experience of a particular group of women who have left their jobs after having children. There is no doubt that having children while working and leaving work can be big decisions and even milestones in women's lives. Though this might be a personal decision, there can be more. There are social, political, cultural and structural reasons for deciding to leave work after having children, especially when this is mostly the case for mothers rather than fathers. When Belkin (2003) highlighted the situation where professional women were leaving their well-paying and prestigious jobs to be with their families, the primary approach was that the motivation behind such an "opt-out revolution" was women's own desires and choices. However, when studied more deeply, Stone (2007) showed that it is rather the gendered patterns both at work and at home that lead women to opt out of work after having children instead of women's personal preferences. In fact, Orgad (2019) pointed out that women themselves criticised the idea that leaving work was just their

preference; instead, they argued that they were pushed out of work. The reasons behind this social phenomenon may vary from the lack of affordable quality childcare services, gendered division of labour at home to the dominance of the male breadwinner model in society—which, overall, are linked to the motherhood ideology.

Hence, the objective of this study is to analyse how women who used to work in white-collar jobs, mostly in professional and managerial jobs, experience motherhood and opt out of work process and to see whether there is a connection between their experiences and motherhood ideology. The primary focus of this study is on white-collar women employees, mainly with managerial duties, because despite the literature on professional mothers' opting out has been accumulated in the past two decades (Stone, 2007; Orgad, 2019), there is still a lack of research specifically on this topic in Turkey. Thus, this study aims to contribute to the existing literature by fulfilling this gap. Also, given that there are more obstacles for women in climbing the career ladder compared to their male counterparts, withdrawal from the labour market seems like a huge decision to make. Glass ceiling is still persistent, considering there has been no change almost for two decades in the number of women in leadership and managerial positions (United Nations, 2020). Hence, opting out may be critical in explaining the low numbers of women managers and professionals.

Moreover, this study intends to analyse whether these women were going through similar phases and how they coped with their situation while they experienced this turning point (from a professional worker to a stay-at-home mother). Also, it aimed to observe if there were differences between the experiences of mothers who opted out permanently and mothers who left work for a certain period of time. This qualitative study based on semi-structured in-depth interviews with these women is expected to contribute to the existing literature on motherhood and women's work by highlighting opting-out as a social and political issue in contrast to the main tendency that considers it as personal most of the time.

1.2. Background and Significance

Since the main focus of this research is studying mothers' opting out of work, issues regarding motherhood as well as women's work are also significant to be mentioned. Motherhood has been one of the key issues for challenging the patriarchy in the

feminist movements and the feminist literature. The background of the discussions on motherhood date back to second-wave feminism, which broadened the focus from suffrage and legal rights of first-wave feminism to sexuality, reproduction, rape, public/private dichotomy, domesticity, and motherhood. There is a direct relationship between public/private dichotomy and motherhood since maternity is associated with the domestic and private realm. Nevertheless, as I also argue that the personal is political, the issues considered personal, such as maternity, are, in fact, social issues and need social and cultural explanations. Hence, apart from being an individual experience, motherhood is a social institution that includes social, political and cultural relations. Here, *social institutions* can be defined as the systems consisting of social norms, values and roles that serve the functioning of the social order in the society; and were characterised by being “internalised by the human actors who constitute them” (Giddens, 1984, as cited in Martin, 2004, p. 1255) and by having “a legitimating ideology” according to Berger and Luckmann (1966, as cited in Martin, 2004, p. 1257). Thus, motherhood as an institution operates through the motherhood ideology which is internalised by the members of society. As Rich (1986) made the distinction of motherhood as an experience of any woman and a social and patriarchal institution, the emphasis of Rich’s work was on “the institution of motherhood as a form of patriarchal social control” (Hallstein, 2010, p. 23). The aim of this study also is making a critique of motherhood as a social institution and reveal whether there is a relationship between that and mothers’ opting out of work mainly to provide childcare. When it comes to the question of why the motherhood ideology or socially constructed myths around motherhood are essential for these women and their experiences specifically, it is because they find themselves in a position where their roles as workers and mothers contradict, and they have to make a choice not only for themselves but for the sake of their children. Hence, the motivations behind leaving work may be based on myths of good or intensive mothering that stem from the motherhood ideology and their contradiction with the worker identity. Indeed, women may develop different coping mechanisms to overcome this conflict between their work and family life, which is also problematic because it is primarily women who try to reconcile their work-family life instead of men. For instance, a study from the work-family literature indicates that switching to part-time jobs is a strategy for Belgian young women with children to reconcile their work and family responsibilities

(Laurijssen & Glorieux, 2013). While this can be a universal problem, what and which options are available to women for developing a strategy also depend on the social and structural factors such as the culture and social policies of the country that they live in. In the case of Turkey, there is not enough gender transformative policies on work-life balance and given the lack of affordable childcare, leaving work may seem the most convenient option for these women and their families. Still, these women put so much labour into their education and training and planned to pursue their careers, yet, they had to leave them. Such a choice cannot be regarded as personal when so many other factors lead these women to make a choice. Thus, discussing why these women quit work after becoming mothers is essential.

Moreover, the significance of this thesis can be explained in three points. First, despite extensive research on work-life balance, studies on the so-called ‘mommy track’ or specifically on ‘opting out’ remain insufficient. While issues regarding work and family life reconciliation must continue to be studied, it is also essential to understand the underlying factors behind why women opt out of the workforce after having children in order to achieve a comprehensive picture of the feminist literature. Moreover, while this is a universal issue for women, it has critical importance for Turkey. The research methods on opting out in Turkey are rather quantitative—there is a number of studies and research indicating that there is a phenomenon as opting out, such as The 2013 Turkey Demographic and Health Survey, which indicated that 19 per cent of women who did not work in the last 12 months prior to the survey stated their main reason to not to work is to provide childcare; also, 14 per cent of women, who have worked since the age of 12 but did not work at the time of the survey, quit their jobs due to pregnancy and childcare (pp. 181-182). Thus, there is a need for more qualitative studies on this topic. This study aims to capture and present these women’s realities from their own narratives by conducting a qualitative study. In addition, the existing studies in Turkey are mostly psychological, so they are conducted in terms of psychological concerns. For instance, a study on young women who left their jobs after becoming mothers indicates that even though women have positive beliefs towards mothers’ working, women’s choices on maternal care were mainly determined by environmental constraints such as working environment, work schedule and childcare options (Sayil, Güre, Uçanok, & Pungello, 2009). Even if the objective of

that study is rather psychological, the importance of the social factors affecting women's lives cannot be overlooked. Though believing in the significance of the interdisciplinary approach in grasping complex issues, since I come from a sociology background, this study calls for more sociological studies. Thus, this study aims to analyse the issue from a sociological point of view.

Secondly, the fact that quitting professional careers after having children is a common experience among women shows that this is a social issue rather than a personal one. This is not a mere and inevitable path in the lives of women; it stems from socially constructed gender roles because it is a common experience among women compared to men. Thus, one of the arguments in this study is that this is a patriarchal phenomenon related to the motherhood ideology. This study is expected to contribute to the literature by underlying a gendered phenomenon.

Last but not least, it is significant in showing the gendered patterns of opting out, as the existing studies showed that women's decision to leave work is related to their mothering and care duties. Several studies showed that when asked about the motivations behind opting out of work, "women overwhelmingly cited family responsibilities as the reason; men cited career advancement" (Stone, 2007, p. 10). So why do these women feel obliged to take over childcare responsibilities, particularly by themselves? These are the main points that constitute the significance of this study.

1.3. Research Question and Objectives

My research interest in this topic goes back to an article I read a few years ago, *Women who quit their careers: a group rarely investigated*, (Vieira, 2016). When I read this, I realised this is a matter for many working mothers, yet I wonder whether the same can be said for working fathers. Given the time and the effort, I did not find it surprising to learn that the answer is no—this does not apply to working fathers at all. Later, I noticed women in my own family also encountering this kind of problem. My mother was a working woman who opted out of work by early retirement to take care of my brother. One of my cousins, who majored in engineering, has given a career break and has become a full-time mother while her husband has continued to work. I had the chance to observe how women experience this kind of change from 'intensive working' to 'intensive mothering' in their lives and how they are subject to the myths

of motherhood, such as being a good mother and total devotion to children. Thus, it was not hard to realise that there was much more to investigate about the issue.

Here, the conceptualisation in this study is explained in four parts. First, the term *motherhood ideology* refers to the concepts, norms and values attached to motherhood in a society shaped by the patriarchal system. Mainly the belief that “all women need to be mothers, all mothers need their children and all children need their mothers” (Oakley, 1975, p. 186). Motherhood ideology is diffused in society and internalised by the members of society just as mothers themselves. The internalisation is problematic because women are ascribed to maternity and domesticity and are expected to embrace a total devotion to mothering through such ideology. As Glenn (1994) states, “by depicting motherhood as natural, a patriarchal ideology of mothering locks women into biological reproduction and denies their identities and selfhood outside mothering” (p. 9). The concept of motherhood ideology as it is conceptualised in this study can also be explained as “patriarchal motherhood” which operates through the assumptions “that all women want to be mothers (essentialisation), that maternal ability and motherlove are innate to all mothers (naturalisation), and that all mothers find joy and purpose in motherhood (idealisation)” (O’Reilly, 2016).

Second, *the myths of motherhood* refer to the socially constructed ideas on motherhood that stem from the motherhood ideology and are far from reflecting the reality yet internalised and reproduced by the members of the society. For instance, that every woman should become a mother to feel complete, that being a mother is instinctive and natural, and that motherhood should be a mother’s ultimate responsibility and identity.

Third, *work-life balance* for working mothers means the harmony between their allocated time to work and family responsibilities. Life also includes personal and leisure time in the work-life balance literature, yet; life is conceptualised as domestic life, family responsibilities, care work and division of labour within the household since this study tries the challenge these aspects.

Last, *the concept of opting out* refers to working mothers’ withdrawal from the labour market, which emerges as a choice on the surface. Moreover, the relationship between

opting out and motherhood ideology means that the socially constructed norms around motherhood are related to women's decision to leave work after having children.

The primary focus of this thesis is on well-educated, white-collar, professional women's lived experiences on opting out of work after becoming mothers. A white-collar worker is conceptualised as a worker who conducts administrative, professional or managerial work. In contrast to manual or blue-collar workers who are occupied with manufacturing, the working domain of white-collar workers is rather the service sector (Prinz, 2001). Also, the main focus of this research is on white-collar women employees who perform professional and managerial work because while there are several studies from different disciplines on well-educated, white-collar women opting out of work due to having children mainly in the US. (Stone & Lovejoy, 2004: Williams, Manvell & Bornstein, 2006: Jones, 2012), not much research has been conducted on this topic in Turkey. As the primary focus of the existing literature on women's opting out is based on white-collar, professional workers, it is crucial to contribute to the literature in Turkey by providing an example on this topic. In addition, another reason behind determining university graduates and white-collar workers was that opting out appeared as a common practice among these women, which seems to contradict the commitment and labour devoted to their careers before leaving. Stone (2007) stated that as studied before, among "highly qualified women" (those with an undergraduate degree or higher with high honours), 43% of those who became mothers reported leaving the labour force at some point in their careers, indicating care responsibilities as the main reason (p. 9).

The main objective of the thesis is to understand why women from high-ranking jobs decide to leave work after becoming mothers. While the study aims to analyse the implications of leaving work on the lives of these mothers, it also questions whether there is a relationship between mothers' opting out of work and the motherhood ideology as well as motherhood myths, which constitute the sub-questions of this research. As a result of this, the main research question is:

- Why do well-educated, white-collar, professional women leave work after becoming mothers in Turkey? What are the social, structural, and cultural factors behind these women's decision to leave work?

The main research question is explored in more detail by the following two sub-questions:

- What are the implications of opting out of work on the lives of these mothers?
- How are the mothers' opting out of work and motherhood ideology related?

Undoubtedly, becoming a mother and quitting a career are significant changes in someone's life. These women were undergoing these changes together, interrelatedly. While every woman's experience is unique, there might be a typical gendered pattern simultaneously. First, the study aims to reveal the motivations, reasons and struggles behind the decision to leave work to provide care for their children. Then, the aim is to understand their own perceptions regarding motherhood after heading home through their own expressions and narratives. Ultimately, this study intended to discover how women's experiences are connected to social, cultural and institutional relations—they might reflect the motherhood ideology that is very much embedded in society, especially in Turkey. It is suggested that exploring how and why these mothers experience such career breaks will provide a better understanding of gender relations in work and motherhood.

1.4. Methodology

The primary standpoint of this study is the feminist approach since it aims to reflect women's realities from their own experiences while critiquing the patriarchy and gender relations in general. Throughout the thesis, the socially constructed gender roles and gendered myths that contribute to women's secondary position in the society are challenged.

As this study is interested in women's lived experiences, the most suitable way to collect data was through conducting qualitative research. The qualitative inquiry was the appropriate research design for this study since it is used for research "when the problem needs to be explored; when a complex, detailed understanding is needed; when the researcher wants to write in a literary, flexible style; and when the researcher seeks to understand the context or settings of participants" (Creswell, 2007, p. 51). Moreover, the phenomenological approach is chosen to conduct qualitative research

since this type of approach is used specifically when the aim of the research is to understand how a group of individuals—5 to 25 individuals, share common experiences of a certain phenomenon (Creswell, 2007). In addition, by combining the feminist approach with the phenomenological approach, we can refer to feminist phenomenology which is in accordance with the approach of this research since the objective of this study is to understand the phenomenon of mothers' opting out of work as a shared experience; and to reveal its relationship between the patriarchal ideology of motherhood.

In order to have a comprehensive understanding of participants' experiences, conducting in-depth interviews was the most appropriate data collection method. Thus, semi-structured interviews with 16 women were conducted to realise the study's aims. Prior to the main study, a pilot study with four participants was conducted to assess the feasibility of the main study, and to pre-test the interview questionnaire. Out of 16 main interviews, nine were conducted via Zoom, four were conducted via phone, and three were face-to-face. According to the research interests of this study, the sample was identified to consist of respondents with specific characteristics. The characteristics identified for reaching respondents were: (1) having at least an associate degree; (2) having used to work in professional jobs; (3) leaving the workforce after becoming a mother permanently or with unpaid leave, and (4) having at least three years of work experience before leaving. The main focus is on well-educated, white-collar women employees—who perform professional and managerial duties because there are not enough studies addressing white-collar worker women opting out of work in Turkey. Moreover, a particular year of work experience is an ordinary job requirement in the existing labour market, especially for managerial positions. Usually, 3 to 5 years is considered a benchmark for employers and recruiters because it is regarded as “the ideal time frame for a candidate to master their role” (Ingersoll, 2019). Following this assumption, at least three years is specified for this study as a period by which these professional women are considered skilled with a certain amount of work commitment and stability. Following these characteristics, the sample consisted of 16 women—university graduates who used to work in professional jobs and left the workforce after becoming mothers and have at least three years of work experience before leaving.

Hence, the most appropriate sampling method for this research was snowball sampling—since snowball sampling is used when finding respondents with similar characteristics which are of research interest, with the aid of existing respondents or people who know of possible respondents with the identified characteristics for the research interests (Biernacki & Waldorf, 1981). My family, friends and I have shared the research announcement on our social media accounts. I asked for referrals to the respondents if they knew someone who might be eligible to participate in the study. Also, I reached out to blogger moms, and I found most of the participants when they shared my research announcement. As for the data collection, the interview questionnaire consisted of 15 demographic and 40 open-ended, with a total of 55 questions. The interview questions were divided into seven themes: demographic information, working life, leaving work/post-work life, division of labour/childcare in the household, social circle, opinions on childcare, perceptions on motherhood and motherhood discourse. Demographic information about the participants is necessary both for providing a background for the participants and for analysing the relationship between their demographic characteristics and their decisions to leave work. One of the critical points is to analyse their experiences in terms of working life before becoming mothers to compare the post-work period. Asking questions based on the process of leaving work and the post-work life provides the most prominent answers for the motivations and implications of leaving work, which compose the main objectives of the study. Referring to the division of labour and childcare in the household is crucial to understand whether there is gendered domestic and care work within the household in which mothers take the bulk of the burden—causing a double burden of paid and unpaid domestic work for mothers. Hence, themes on paid work and unpaid domestic work are essential mainly to reveal their experiences in terms of work-life balance. The theme of social circle refers to opinions and negative or positive reactions of people that compose the social circle of respondents on motherhood, childcare, women’s working and leaving work. This theme is vital to grasp whether there are any signs of sociocultural pressure on these mothers regarding women’s employment or motherhood, motherhood penalty or mom-shaming, or any form of support. Specifically, the opinions of family members might be critical in showing whether mothers are subjected to cultural ideals of mothers’ working or leaving work and whether it affects their decisions. Opinions of co-workers or employers may reveal

whether mothers face motherhood penalty in the form of direct or indirect discrimination because they decide to become mothers or to leave work after becoming mothers. Mothers' opinions on childcare mainly reveal their policy recommendations according to their lived experiences. Participants' perceptions of motherhood and motherhood discourse are distinctive elements to assess whether these mothers internalise the myths of motherhood and motherhood ideology, such as good and bad mothering, intensive mothering, and patriarchal motherhood. Thus, themes on social circle and perceptions of motherhood and motherhood discourse serve the aim of analysing the relationship between motherhood ideology and opting out of work.

When it comes to the limitations of the study, there are three possible limitations for this thesis. Since this study is based on qualitative research, it cannot provide an overall picture of women's experiences on leaving work. While there was no aim of making generalisations and achieving an outcome representing most of the society, the small sample size and the qualitative research objectives placed a limitation in achieving generalisable results. As the main focus of this study is on professional women's experiences, the sample might be too educated, raising questions about the representativeness of the study. It would be essential to conduct similar studies with other groups of women employees to see how their experiences differ and what possible patterns can be observed. I chose to study this topic when I started my master's degree before the outbreak of COVID-19 and conducted the research after, in the post-pandemic period. Since this study could reflect the gender dynamics within the household, the results could also reflect the post-pandemic dynamics. After the COVID-19 pandemic, society encountered a period when most people were staying at home, and many started to work remotely; thus, the gendered division of labour and care work dynamics within the household might have been shaped differently in this process. Thus, some of the findings of this study may depend on a specific experience.

1.5. Chapter Overview of the Thesis

In this part, the structure of the thesis is explained in detail. This study consists of five chapters: introduction, literature review on motherhood and women's opting out of work, methodology, findings and discussion, and conclusion.

The first chapter (Introduction) introduces the study in all its aspects. It consists of five sub-sections: introduction, background and significance, research question and objectives, methodology, and chapter overview of the thesis. This chapter provides a summary for understanding the scope, the aim and the research design of the thesis.

The second chapter (Theoretical Framework and Literature Review) addresses the discussions on motherhood, starting from the early feminist theories to recent studies. The motherhood ideology is problematised, and a detailed critique of motherhood is provided. Further, debates on women's employment, care work and work-life balance in general and specifically for the case of Turkey are provided. Ultimately, mothers' opting out of work is discussed mainly in this chapter. Opting out as a social phenomenon, in general, is examined, and the case of Turkey is presented in detail.

The third chapter (Methodology) is about the research design, research approach and research method. The sampling method, data collection and analysis method, and details on the research sample are given in this chapter. Also, the limitations of the study are presented.

The fourth chapter (Findings and Discussion) presents the findings of the study together with an analysis and discussion. This chapter aims to connect findings with the arguments of the study and provide an analysis of the issue. The discussion consists of the relationship between the findings and the motherhood ideology.

The fifth chapter (Conclusion) provides an overall summary and overview of the thesis with concluding remarks. In addition, it also includes policy recommendations and suggestions for further research on the topic.

CHAPTER 2

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK & LITERATURE REVIEW

Feminist theory as a paradigm constitutes the main theoretical framework of this study. The debates and issues handled in this study are mainly based on the feminist theoretical framework. Feminist theory mainly challenges the existing social structure based on patriarchy and gender inequality and aims to demolish women's oppression and secondary status in society. Hence, challenging the patriarchal system and gender inequality based on traditional gender roles will compose the base of the issues tackled throughout this study.

The literature review consists of three main sections: (1) feminist discussions on motherhood, (2) women's employment, care work and work-life balance, and (3) professional women leaving work after becoming mothers. In the first section, a compassing feminist critique on motherhood will be provided, comprising motherhood as a social institution; motherhood ideologies and myths of motherhood; different approaches within the feminist theory; and the conflictive position of motherhood in society. This section will constitute the theoretical background of mothers' opting out of work since motherhood as a social issue is at the centre of the thesis. Also, this section will illuminate the question of the possible relationship between mothers' opting out of work and motherhood ideology. In the second section, major tangible issues in women's employment, care work and work-life balance will be tackled, all of which form the grounds of the discussion on mothers' opting out of work. It is because women's labour—both in the form of paid labour and unpaid domestic and care labour is at the heart of the topic of opting out of work. In the third section, the debates over mothers' opting out of work will be presented in general and with a specific focus on the case of Turkey. This section will compose the main focus of this study. The second and the third section of the literature review will cover the issues

related to the main research questions of the study—why mothers leave work after becoming mothers and what the possible implications of leaving work are in mothers’ lives.

2.1. Feminist Discussions on Motherhood

2.1.1. Motherhood and Mothering, a Social Institution

Motherhood and mothering have always been an area of debate for the feminist inquiry. Simply put, the differentiation between the two; motherhood refers to the condition of being a mother and constitutes one’s identity within it while mothering refers to the practices of care work performed by a mother, or as Alison Jaggar puts it, “a historically and culturally variable relationship in which one individual nurtures and cares for another” (Jaggar, 1984, as cited in Glenn, 1994, p. 3). Using such a definition, we argue that rather than simply biological, there are social and cultural dimensions to mothering and motherhood. Both concepts have been critical for feminist studies because motherhood and mothering are at the centre of family and social organisation of gender which are related to patriarchy. It is because apart from being an identity and experience for the people who mother, both terms are attached to the social norms and values mainly derived from the patriarchal system. Therefore, motherhood as a social institution is based on patriarchal ideology, and its justification is based on biological determinism. According to O’Reilly (2010):

Institutions are established social mechanisms and effective cultural practices that regulate human behaviour according to the needs of a community, not individuals. Thus, motherhood is not simply biological or innate; it is also a social institution that functions ideologically and politically. (p. 572)

Motherhood as a social institution is at the heart of a patriarchal capitalist society because women’s reproductive work—which refers to a list of duties to maintain daily life and nurture and regenerate both the future and current workforce generationally (Hester, 2018), is the fundamental point of the maintenance of the system. It is because of women’s reproductive activities—domestic labour, childbirth and childcare, that men are able to go to work the next day.

How motherhood and mothering are connected to the patriarchal capitalist system has been explained by Rothman (1994) through the interconnection of patriarchy, capitalism and technology—where mothers become unskilled workers by means of childbearing and childrearing due to male dominance, exploitation and monitoring. When female bodily functions are used to justify women’s role as mothers, we can talk about a possible relationship between motherhood and women’s oppression. From pregnancy to postpartum, female bodies are tried to be regulated and controlled by society through medicalisation resulting in the institutionalisation of motherhood. Then, due to the biological dimension of mothering, the central belief and practice are that mothers become the primary caregivers. However, since care work is a much more complex issue that has social and structural dimensions, attributing caring mostly to mothers due to biological reasons, in fact, reinforces the traditional gender roles and the sexual division of labour—and impels mothers to be domestic workers. Furthermore, such a theory on the relationship between patriarchal capitalism and motherhood comes into existence in relation to neoliberal policies as well. Especially in Turkey, the mutual relationship between conservative ideology and neoliberal policies has a direct effect on women—which becomes an element of maternity or employability (Sapmaz, 2016). Ultimately, all of these serve the operation of motherhood as a social institution.

2.1.2. Motherhood Ideologies and Myths of Motherhood

As stated before, social and cultural norms and values assign particular meanings to motherhood. Thus, motherhood is not free from the patriarchal beliefs internalised by the society which reinforce the conventional understanding of motherhood and traditional gender roles beneath heteronormative constructions of family. Motherhood is considered sacred in most, but especially conservative societies. In the Turkish context, in a social order where being a woman is predominantly constructed through being a mother, motherhood becomes as if it is the sole legitimate identity for women. Behind such process, there are motherhood ideologies—motherhood ideology is referred to as an umbrella term throughout the study, acknowledging the various forms and dimensions of it, such as intensive mothering (Hays, 1996), which is mothers’ intensive physical, emotional, financial and educational investing for the child; and combative mothering (Moore & Abetz, 2016) which normalises competition between

mothers based on parenting choices and mainly refers to the mommy wars—the rivalry among stay-at-home and working mothers. These two ideologies were conceptualised as “new momism” at the beginning of the 2000s, perpetuating the socially constructed standards for mothers which by no means they could achieve (Douglas & Michaels, 2004). In Turkey, one of the most prominent trends, or a form of motherhood ideology, in which motherhood is considered a sacred and divine rank, can be described as ‘sacred motherhood.’ Under the ideology of motherhood as sacred, a demanding role is attached to mothers—a role of absolute sacrifice and patience. Sacrifice and patience have been accepted as virtues for a long time in the culture of Turkey, which manifest itself in the attributions towards motherhood by the existing culture and Islamic discourse where an utter sacrifice is expected from a mother (Abdula & Kocabıykoğlu, 2018). Hence, ideologies of intensive mothering and the good mother as a combination come into existence in the form of sacred motherhood in Turkey. Also, combative mothering stands highly relevant in Turkey, where mothers, like any other group of women, are constantly exposed to comments, comparisons, and criticisms by members of society. This exposure finds itself most prominently in the comparison between working mothers and stay-at-home mothers, with the assumption that only one group comprises ideal mothers. For the case of working mothers, they were usually criticised as being neglectful (Hays, 1996; Douglas & Michaels, 2004), with growing hostility towards them as they did not choose to stay at home with their children (Moore & Abetz, 2016). After that point, the motherhood ideologies followed by the proliferation of the mommy track because more working mothers started to leave work to be with their kids, and this was regarded as an outcome of their free choice—the best decision in their lives (Douglas & Michaels, 2004). Nevertheless, while there is undoubtedly more than one ideology of motherhood, these ideologies of motherhood discussed above would be relevant for Turkey considering such sacred motherhood.

Moreover, the underlying motherhood ideology creates the myth that all women should have children. One of the most striking and prominent interpretations of the myth of motherhood in feminist theory is Ann Oakley’s description that “all women need to be mothers, all mothers need their children and all children need their mothers,” which is at the heart of the socialisation process that impels women to

become mothers (1975, p. 186). The motherhood ideology and the myth of motherhood are intertwined in this sense—two systems that contribute to the maintenance of one another. As also shown in a study on motherhood ideology before, motherhood as an institution and mothering as an experience has a dyadic relationship in the sense that mothers’ perceptions and experiences are shaped by the institution while they reproduce the institution itself at the same time (Uluğtekin, 2000, p. 192). Moreover, society’s perceptions towards motherhood and opinions on mothering appear so powerful that motherhood ceases to be a part of an individual’s life and becomes a form of domination that is condemned to the control and approval of society—and mothers are subject to this domination regardless of their age, socioeconomic status or occupation (Dudu Karaman & Doğan, 2018). Furthermore, myths of motherhood create ideals of good mothers and bad mothers. Mothers are good mothers when they act in a specific way—which means society has opinions and expectations on how a mother should be. These opinions and expectations are also products of the motherhood ideology and a means of surveillance.

2.1.3. Oppression or Empowerment? Feminist Thought

There has been a comprehensive critique of motherhood that feminist theories have provided. The critical era in which the debate on motherhood had proliferated the most was second-wave feminism. Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique* significantly impacted the feminist movement by shedding light on the 1950s American homemakers’ unhappy domestic lives. The main issues problematised by second-wave feminism had proliferated around reproductive rights, sexuality, domestic violence and rape. Motherhood was also on the agenda of the second wave. Starting from that, some feminist activists considered motherhood a mechanism of oppression, whereas some urged upon the power of female reproductivity. On the one hand, Firestone argued that “the ideology of motherhood justified women’s homebound existence and kept them outside the centres of real power” (1970). On the other hand, Adrienne Rich claimed that “the experience of motherhood was—at least potentially—a powerful emotional experience that put women in touch with their bodies and their children” (Rich, 1976, as cited in Glenn, 1994, p. 10). Although Rich also agreed with the existence of patriarchal motherhood as an institution that tried to subordinate women

to the household, Rich emphasised the potential power embedded in mothering as an experience.

Furthermore, recent feminist scholars, including Patricia Hill Collins and Andrea O'Reilly, challenged the essentialist and universalistic understanding of motherhood which has disregarded the different experiences of each group of mothers and what empowerment is for them (Takševa, 2018). Collins especially argued that diversity in mothering had been neglected in most of the feminist studies on motherhood, and the experiences of white, middle-class mothers have been assumed to if applicable to all mothers (Glenn, 1994, p. 6). There has now been a growing area of research in motherhood studies. Although I believe motherhood as a subject matter should be included and studied in gender and women's studies, feminist scholarship should be open to discussing motherhood in diversity since it can be both a source of oppression and empowerment for the mothers themselves.

2.1.4. Conflicting Positions of Motherhood in Society

Motherhood is a contradicting area not only for feminist theory but also for the male-defined society itself because it can provide women with both empowerment and weakness. The perception of mothers in society is in contradiction. Whereas mothers are being celebrated as divine givers, they are subjected to intervention from outside, criticism and mother-shaming. While there is a dimension of pride in being a mother that can take the form of a source of self-confidence, importance and empowerment, their role both within the family and the society is taken for granted. Moreover, the socially constructed myths of motherhood have meanings not only for mothers but also women who cannot or choose not to become mothers. Those myths attached to motherhood lead to the marginalisation of women who did not become mothers—and in fact, these women may weaken mothers by using the claim of an ideal of freedom in order to cope with the marginalisation instead of challenging the pronatalist system (Yıkmış, 2018). However, it is more than just a matter of freedom; instead, it becomes a means of competition between mothers and non-mothers. On the one hand, praising motherhood, and creating an alternative ideal of childlessness on the other hand, in fact, produces a “maternalistic hierarchy” (Rowbotham, 1989, p. 87). In this sense, mothers and non-mothers are constantly compared in many ways, which is prominent

mainly in the competition between stay-at-home mothers and working mothers. There is a constant comparison between working and non-working mothers, not only in society but also in feminist literature. Women's paid work is highly emphasised by some feminist thinkers—arguing that it is at the heart of women's empowerment. While it can be true to some point, others criticised this idea for being too presumed and simple, which they called the “Engelian myth” (Pearson, 2007). The counterargument to the overemphasis on women's paid employment is that some feminists accepted motherhood as powerful and emancipatory. These debates also find themselves in daily life, as we encounter praising working women for acquiring economic power and freedom and about stay-at-home mothers prioritising their children's care and development. This creates a comparison and even competition between working women and stay-at-home mothers, to which the so-called ‘mommy wars’ refers.

2.2. Women's Employment, Care Work and Work-Life Balance (WLB)

Work-life balance refers to the balance between the amount of time spent in one's job and the amount of time allocated for family and leisure activities (Cambridge Dictionary, 2022). Whereas different individual characteristics, family and work structure are determining factors of work-life balance, imbalance in work-life has implications on overall personal well-being, family life and organisation of work (Delecta, 2011); gender is also a critical determinant in addition to these. Thus, not only a topic at the heart of everyday life, but work-life balance is also a broad area of feminist debate and sociological research. With the transition to modern states, the emergence of the nuclear family and capitalist mode of production, work and family became the main sites of individual life. That work and family emerged as two main distinguished but still intertwined spheres of everyday life has a significant impact on the lives of individuals. However, this impact is differentiated rather than universal—especially for men and women. Men's experience of balancing work and personal life cannot be equalised to women's. Therefore, before raising any questions on work-life balance for employed parents and especially mothers, it is essential to mention how work and home became two separate spheres, which has been conceptualised as the public and private dichotomy. Starting from the emergence of the Industrial Revolution, together with the capitalist mode of production, the dichotomy between

the public and private spheres originated, which also underpinned the motherhood ideology. Coming to the 20th century, if the male-breadwinner and female homemaker model of the 1950s in the US. is examined, in fact, a gendered work and home separation is observed, which is still persistent in the transformation of work. This separation emerged due to the growth and the changes in the market, especially with capitalist ideology becoming predominant, which also originated a “white-collar ideal worker norm” (Davies & Frink, 2014). Thus, this means that men’s role in the public and women’s role in the private sphere was promoted in the structure of the society. It is not a simple individualistic choice that men and women adopt different gender roles within and outside the household, but rather it is the gendered system of work and family that impel men and women to specific roles. Women’s mothering role is assumed instinctive—which justifies the idea that women’s primary role takes place in the domestic sphere, and the problem is that “culturally and politically, the public sphere dominates the domestic, and hence men dominate women” (Chodorow, 1999, p. 10). Although the analysis of Chodorow is based on heteronormativity and does not present a great example of an inclusive analysis, it remarkably explains the hierarchy between public and private. Such hierarchy, linked to women’s reproductive and care work, operates as the basis for today’s social organisation of work and family and the socially constructed gender roles. This conflicts with women’s labour force participation and also professionalisation, a conflict of work-life balance that is central to the objectives of this research.

2.2.1. Women’s Employment, Professionalisation, Managerial Work

This study focuses on white-collar professional women’s experience of work, motherhood, childcare and their conflicting relationship. Most of the mothers’ jobs were either directly managerial occupations or included managerial duties. Thus, there is a need for a debate on women’s professionalisation and managerial work based on the objectives of this study. Also, as mentioned before, women’s mothering is affected by their professional role in work—hence, their mothering experiences cannot be separately analysed from their position with regard to the labour market and paid work (Kaya, 2008).

To start with women's employment, in dual systems theory, Hartmann (1990) argues that we cannot understand women's employment without taking into account the interaction of capitalism and patriarchy, which operates as a dual system. Further, Walby (1990) provides suggestions for developing the theory by criticising the overemphasis on capitalism and patriarchy and drawing attention to other determinants, such as the state—which is central to resolving the contradiction created by these dual systems over “utilisation of women's labour” (p. 50). Indeed, the role of the state is critical whether to challenge the gender inequality in women's work or to exacerbate the existing inequalities through its ideology. In today's world, the primary agents working on achieving gender equality are mostly non-governmental organisations, unions and civil society organisations when the role of the state remains inadequate and even destructive, especially in countries like Turkey, where conservatism is a constant feature of the welfare state. Moreover, Walby (1990) further argues that when women's participation in the public space increased more and more every day, we moved from a private patriarchy to a public patriarchy. This transformation shows that patriarchy as a social structural system evolves according to societal changes and creates persistent ideologies in which women's secondary position continues. Thus, we encounter gender inequalities in employment and the workplace as a product of public patriarchy.

While there has been substantial effort and development in achieving gender equality in work and employment, there is still a long way to go. There are several systematic issues affecting women's employment—some are directly related to the objectives of this study. Women's unpaid domestic labour, problems regarding the provision of childcare services, and the gender gap in managerial work are regarded as the primary issues behind women's opting out of work, specifically in this research. It is also indicated that “adverse social norms”, “discriminatory laws and gaps in legal protection”, and “failure to recognise, reduce, and redistribute unpaid household work and care” are the main systematic constraints that prohibit women's economic empowerment (UN Secretary-General's High-Level Panel on Women's Economic Empowerment, 2016). These issues regarding women's work are rooted in capitalism, and patriarchal ideologies and not only perception of society but also state ideology as well as social policies are based on these ideologies. Women's unpaid domestic work

is invisible, and women's paid work is regarded as subsidiary to income earned by men—and the organisation of work is based on this understanding. Also, the gender pay gap is another inequality for women in the workplace. Although both men and women do the same job, women can earn less than men, which is still relevant globally today. A group that mainly suffers from such inequalities is working mothers. Working mothers still face motherhood penalty—the discrimination against them in terms of pay, benefits and perceived capability, “which limits their chances of career advancement and reinforces the perception that their paid labour is secondary to that of men” (Daibes, 2020, as cited in Kwan, 2021). Ultimately, all of these constraints and inequalities have the potential to affect mothers' quitting their jobs either directly or indirectly.

When it comes to professions, professionalisation has emerged mainly by means of the transition to modernisation together with industrialisation. While the history of professionalisation is a topic of study in its own right, the focus of this research is how it is connected to mothering and women's making of motherhood and work altogether. Therefore, this research proposes a relationship between professionalisation and motherhood. That being said, it is essential to discuss what professionalisation means for women.

When we talk about paid work, women's professionalisation can be regarded as a tool for empowerment and emancipation in terms of gender inequality. While it is open for discussion that a women's privileged position based on class, race, socioeconomic status or occupation can provide a space for emancipation, it is more complex. Women's empowerment is a complex issue—having a high-ranking job cannot assure empowerment, and thinking otherwise would be falling into an essentialist understanding (Pearson, 2007). It is no doubt that unequal gender relations are, in fact, about power relations within the capitalist patriarchal system, which means they can take different forms and can still apply to diverse groups of women. One striking proof of this is gender segregation in managerial work. Leadership and managerial positions are held mostly by men. In the *Women in the Workplace 2022* report representing the case of the US and Canada, for example, nearly half of women hold entry-level positions, whereas only 26% of total women employers make up C-suite level leadership positions compared to 74% of men (McKinsey & Company & LeanIn.Org,

2022). Furthermore, globally, only 28% of managerial positions were held by women in 2019, which is nearly unchanged since 1995 (United Nations, 2020). In the case of Turkey, the numbers are not promising. By 2020, the proportion of women in senior and middle management positions was only 19.3 per cent, compared to 80.7 per cent of men (TURKSTAT, 2022a). Also, Turkey ranks 29 out of 36 countries in Europe in the percentage of positions held by women in senior management positions in 2021 (EIGE, 2022). These numbers prove that the glass ceiling is still persistent; women still rarely take part in decision-making and power positions. Thus, it is not easy for women who work in managerial jobs to maintain their position in a system where the organisation of managerial work is based on the ideal of a ‘male worker.’ This ideal or “mythical male worker” (Cobble, Gordon & Henry, 2014) is free from childcare and domestic responsibilities, always available and willing to sacrifice family for the sake of their career. Hence, what is expected from women in the workplace is to be able to suit this ideal form of a worker even though women still carry the burden of care and household responsibilities.

2.2.2. Unpaid Domestic Labour and Care Work

Women’s unpaid domestic labour and care work are two of the main factors affecting women’s employment. According to the latest report on the UN, gender equality, the unequal distribution of care work, and unpaid domestic labour is obstacles for women to participate in the labour market—and the gender gap in labour force participation persists, with only 47% of women compared to 74% of men participate in the labour force as of 2020 (UN, 2020). In Turkey, moreover, the employment rate of women in the 25-49 age group with children under the age of was 25.2%, while the employment rate of men was 85.5% in 2020 (TURKSTAT, 2022a), which shows the gender gap in unpaid care work and its effect on employment. Fathers’ involvement in childcare is very limited in Turkey, even in the most routine tasks—the participation in care work is very low, except for having fun and spending time with the children.

As for domestic responsibilities, the public and private dichotomy is evident in women and men sharing household chores. In general, the contribution of men to housework in Turkey is through doing the household chores related to the outside world, such as going to the market (GWSRC, 2022). However, women’s unpaid domestic labour is

still invisible and taken for granted due to the gendered division of labour. In this sense, time-use surveys have become critical in illuminating the time women spend on household chores compared to men so that women's invisible domestic labour can become visible in some manner. Memiş, Öneş and Kızılırmak (2012), using the data from the first national time use survey in Turkey, indicated that women spend 5 hours on average household and care responsibilities while this is 50 minutes for men in Turkey. They concluded that the gendered division of labour persists in Turkey, the total workload of women increases throughout their life cycle, and working women suffer from a double shift; all of which creates “housewifisation” of women—a buffer mechanism because women's social reproduction has become a social welfare mechanism (Memiş et al., 2012). The housewifisation of women was priorly explained by Mies (1986) as “this mystification that women are basically housewives” is a necessary precondition for the functioning of capitalist market relations (p. 120). It does not mean that women are necessarily housewives; instead, it refers to the burden of invisible domestic and care labour that falls majorly on their shoulders due to the gendered division of labour and the lack of care services.

It is also crucial to state the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on the division of labour and workload within the household since this research covers the period after the pandemic. It is true that domestic and care responsibilities have increased both for men and women, however; women still perform the majority of the work as “on an average day, women globally spend about three times as many hours on unpaid domestic and care work as men (4.2 hours compared to 1.7)” (UN, 2020, para. 4). It is evident that increased housework and childcare responsibilities during the pandemic negatively affect women's participation in the labour market and their well-being—which calls for awareness campaigns for equal sharing of housework and childcare responsibilities, expanding the institutional care opportunities provided by the state, and encourage the return of women who have left the workforce (Hızıroğlu-Aygün, Köksal & Uysal, 2021).

2.2.3. Debates on Work-Life Balance

Work-life balance (WLB) is a vast area of study which is on the agenda of both sociological research and social policy studies, as well as feminist research. A broad

scholarship has been accumulated on the issue until today so covering all of this accumulation goes beyond the bounds of this study. For this research, the gender aspect of work-life balance and how it is actually related to working mothers and their opting out of work are problematised. First, it is debatable to argue that women's increased labour force participation aggravated the work-life conflict; the conflict has always been there for women. It may become visible by moving towards public patriarchy. The existing social norms and the state policies based on traditional gender roles are at the heart of the conflict between work and family life. The attribution of caregiving and domestic work to women is one of the main problems of this study, which is in direct relation to work-life balance.

How to approach work and family has also undergone a change. Early research on WLB was based on the conflict perspective—assuming the idea that work and family are two separate and conflicting worlds given the limited time to devote different roles in an individual's life (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985). Later on, a more optimistic approach was observed, using the concept of “work and family enrichment,” which proliferated the idea that work and family life could, in fact, be two complementary areas that enrich each other (Greenhaus & Powell, 2006). These kinds of shifts in the paradigm of work-life balance literature have various impacts on how we perceive the issue.

Work-life balance is an extensive social matter that concerns different groups of workers. However, it is without a doubt that gender is a significant factor in how divergent one's experience can be from others. The experiences of working women in balancing work and life are very different from the experiences of working men. While working women's experiences can differ from each other, some issues arise as typical for most working women. These are majorly related to childcare and household responsibilities which are the duties most women are saddled with whether they work or not. In the case of working mothers, it can be said that they suffer from a double burden or a “second shift” (Hochschild & Machung, 1989)—which means that in addition to the paid work outside the home, domestic and childcare responsibilities wait for them in the household. While this may apply to both men and women, it is a fact that women bear the majority of the burden, and this is because of the gendered division of labour stemming from traditional gender roles. In such a condition, it is indeed unrealistic to expect a balance of work and family in the lives of working

women. Thus, it is highly problematic that reconciling work and family and searching for an optimum balance becomes the responsibility of women instead of their partners and even instead of the state. The major role of existing family-friendly work-life balance policies is mostly reinforcing women's role in the domestic sphere, and although work-life balance is an issue for workplaces, in the organisation of work in general, women are obliged to manage the balance (Connell, 2005). Roberts (2005) also highlights the critique that it is the women who try to balance their work and family life and states that it is almost impossible to balance care with paid work without the support of grandparents in the case of Japan. As in this case, working women become compelled to find ways to solve the conflict between work and family—where family comes to mean domestic responsibilities. This happens to be a highly stressful situation that puts pressure on working women and especially on working mothers with caring responsibilities. Therefore, work-life balance debates are accompanied mainly by the various coping strategies developed by working women. Here, it is crucial to point out a couple of different strategies working mothers developed to cope with the competing demands of work and family life. The debate on these strategies is also directly related to the concept of choice. Whether working mothers have a choice or are socially and structurally pushed to make certain decisions is one of the discussions of this study. The choice debate is highly included in the work-life balance literature. It is because, when studied, working mothers mostly express their practices about balancing work and life as personal choices, however; the prevailing concept of choice prevents these women to think of and ask for better policies from employers (Williams, 2018).

When it comes to the strategies to reconcile work and family, one common strategy developed by working mothers can be identified as flexibility. Some working mothers implement flexible working into their lives so that they can overcome the competing demands of work and childcare (Chung & van der Lippe, 2018). One form of flexibility is switching to part-time jobs, a common practice among working mothers. In order to manage time poverty by having control over their time, some working mothers switch to working part-time in the same position. Indeed, this reflects on wages and other career opportunities. In addition, the effectiveness of this practice is also open to debate, given the high demands of the workplace. It should also be noted

that while switching to a part-time job is a practice adopted by both men and women; women tend to use flexibility for domestic duties, whereas it is for work-related purposes for men (Chung & van der Lippe, 2018), which shows the gendered dimension of flexibility as a work-life balance strategy.

Moreover, leaving work permanently or for a certain period of time in the form of unpaid leave is a coping mechanism for working mothers. The concept of choice again becomes critical specifically for the case of women who leave their jobs because, in some cases, they might feel forced to leave given the lack of other options. The following sections discuss the concept of opting out in its own right.

Moreover, one of the indicators of how work-life imbalance affects working mothers is the motherhood penalty faced by most working mothers. The motherhood penalty is defined as “the disadvantages women encounter in terms of earnings and career progression when they have children” (Brearley, 2021, p. 69). Thus, the gender pay gap and mommy track are, in fact, inequalities under the wider concept of the motherhood penalty in that sense. Brearley (2021) further argues that the gender pay gap, in fact, refers to a “motherhood pay gap” and sums up the reasons behind this gap as women’s part-time work or having a career break due to caring responsibilities; bias on pregnancy and maternity; legislative inequalities; and feminisation of some sectors that pay less (p. 73).

All of the issues handled in the work-life balance literature, which are related to the objectives of this study, stem from or reinforce the gender inequalities in the workplace, especially discrimination against working mothers. Ultimately, aside from personal choice, it is likely that these social, legislative and structural problems contribute to working mothers’ withdrawal from the labour market.

2.2.4. Work-Life Balance and Turkey

Although work-life balance is on the agenda of many countries, each has different patterns and trends. Thus, making a brief comparison between Turkey and some other countries might provide a more comprehensive picture of where Turkey stands regarding work-life balance.

Before diving into the discussion on the existing situation on work-life balance in Turkey, the main characteristics of the welfare state and the culture of the society should be briefly examined, as they have various impacts on the balance of work and family. Given the relatively lower fertility rates and ageing population due to the previous anti-natalist policies in the history of Turkey, issues regarding fertility have started to be included in the agenda of the Turkish government. Especially after the beginning of the 2000s, when the AKP came to rule, a substantial transformation started towards a pronatalist discourse regarding maternity and fertility. The rise of familialism under the conservative ideology, which targets families in Turkey, is also a characteristic of this period. In 2008, when the prime minister of the time, Erdoğan, made the call for at least three children in families (“Erdoğan: En Az Üç Çocuk Doğurun,” 2008), this was seen as an actual demonstration of the transformation of the discourse on population policy. Nevertheless, this also contained problems for feminist concerns. Such kind of discourse implied that the Turkish economic system under the rule of AKP had aimed at seizing women’s labour power by either attributing women to the domestic sphere where their reproductive labour was more beneficial for the system or inclining them as cheap labour, such as in textile industries (Dildar, 2022). This means that pronatalist policies result in the commodification of women’s both paid and unpaid domestic labour.

Moreover, apart from the economic agenda, this pronatalist discourse involves a solid patriarchal ideology. In this way, a transformation in gender dynamics that would challenge patriarchy can be prevented when women’s social reproduction is ensured. Thus, the discourse and policy of “at least three children” can also be read as an attempt to prevent women’s empowerment (Dildar, 2022). The enforcement of this agenda emerges in the form of gender-blind social policies, as in this case in terms of maternity, childcare and workplace. Work-life balance conflict involves issues on maternity, parental leave policies, childcare services, and conditions in the workplace (Redmond et al., 2006). Hence, work-life balance is a study area that should go hand in hand with social policies to acquire tangible solutions. However, considering the transformation in the social welfare regime of Turkey starting from the 2000s towards a “conservative-liberal tendency,” especially in terms of social policy context (Buğra & Keyder, 2006, p. 226), the number and the scope of the existing social policies

concerning work-life balance remain insufficient and restricted, let alone the proper implementation of existing policies.

Work-life balance is a severe problem in Turkey for the working population. Compared to the EU28 average, work-life imbalance in Turkey remains relatively high—of all the countries included in the research, the highest share of individuals having problems based on work-life balance in a month belongs to Turkey (Eurofound, 2022). However, the focus on work-life balance in this study is limited to how parents, especially mothers, have experienced work-life imbalance and how it is related to their opting out of the workforce. One of the most problematic social policy areas regarding work-life balance for working parents in Turkey is the parental leave policy. Compared to countries such as Sweden or Norway, which have extensive parental leave policies for both mothers and fathers, Turkey presents a different picture. In Turkey, maternity leave consists of 16 weeks in total, eight weeks before childbirth and eight weeks after childbirth. Since pregnancy is considered as 40 weeks in the calculation of maternity leave, a pregnant worker can take maternity leave as soon as they complete the 32nd week of pregnancy. While maternity leave is 16 weeks, paid paternity leave is only five days for fathers. When it comes to unpaid leave, parents are entitled to 24 months of unpaid parental leave. Fathers can take unpaid leave right after childbirth, whereas mothers can take up unpaid leave when their maternity leave ends. When a comparison is made between the welfare regimes of the UK, Denmark, France and Spain under the EU gender equality framework, it is shown that in the case of Spain, “the welfare state’s traditional support for the male-breadwinner model and its conceptualisation of women as wives and mothers has resulted in the attribution of the role of providing care to the family”—which mainly contributes Spain’s lack of development in policies on work-life balance (Aybars, 2007, p. 587). In this sense, the case of Turkey bears a striking resemblance to Spain in terms of the effect of traditional gender roles on work-life balance policies. Moreover, as the Turkish social policy presents a “hybrid” model containing a small amount of both features of the Southern European and the Middle Eastern welfare regimes, especially where heavily gendered social policies exist (Aybars & Tsarouhas, 2010), this also reflects how persistent patriarchal ideology on maternity and care work in Turkey has an impact on the parental leave policies. Although there has been a considerable need for gender-transformative leave policy

arrangements, the gap between Turkey and other countries remains—and this is due to both a weak legislative framework and conservative ideology.

Furthermore, another substantial issue in work-life balance policies for working parents in Turkey is child care. The provision, accessibility, and quality of childcare services are one of the main problems affecting the balance of work and family for parents. While this is a problem of the welfare state, due to such neoliberal-conservative feature of the welfare state in Turkey, individuals are held responsible for childcare arrangements. When traditional gender roles and gendered division of labour are dominant characteristics and practices in a society, the responsibility of child care is automatically ascribed to women, even in egalitarian households. In Turkey, because kindergartens and preschools are not included in compulsory education, public preschools charge a registration fee ranging from 100 TRY to 250 TRY per month. Primary school to high school is free. There are private preschools—kindergartens which serve children aged 0-24 months, and private day nursing homes which serve children aged 25-66 months, established under the Ministry of Family, Labor and Social Services. Only people from disadvantaged groups can benefit from these organisations for charge free when they make an application. Under the legislation of Labor Law, employers are obliged to establish a breastfeeding room if there are 100 to 150 female workers employed; and to open a nursery for children 0-6 years of age to be left and looked after and for breastfeeding workers to breastfeed their children if there are more than 150 female workers, regardless of their age and marital status (Resmi Gazete, 2013). However, the implementation and supervision of these rules remain insufficient. Not all women benefit from these services, and there are no other options for affordable quality child care. Therefore, who takes care of the child and whether the care is reliable yet affordable is one of the main problems working parents face in Turkey. In UNICEF and Ministry of Labor and Social Security policy report *Child Well-Being in Early Years and Women's Employment*, it is emphasised that there is an enormous impact of accessible, inclusive and high-quality early childhood education and care not only on children's well-being but also on parents' employability and work-life balance (Beşpınar & Aybars, 2013).

Overall, the type of social welfare regime, political discourse, and underlying cultural norms of a country have direct implications on work-life balance both as a domain of

social policy and gender equality. When intensive workplace culture that expects more but pays less is added on top of these, it is almost unrealistic, especially for working mothers, to expect that they can find a balance between work and family by themselves. In addition, the Turkish government has conflicting approaches in terms of childcare and pronatalism. It seems paradoxical because even though the government encourages having children through pronatalist discourse, social policies regarding work-life balance and childcare are insufficient, and families are left to their fate. It demonstrates that the idea of mothers as primary caregivers lies behind the pronatalist policy. This is related to increasing familialism in Turkey, especially in terms of care policies (Akkan, 2018; Aybars, Beşpınar & Kalaycıoğlu, 2018). When the existing policies place the main responsibility of care on families, which automatically refers to women, women's already invisible domestic labour is dissolved, and gender inequalities are reinforced within the family. According to Aybars et al. (2018):

Turkey's care regime is firmly moving from an 'implicit familialism' model, where the state neither offers de-familialization possibilities nor actively supports the caring function of the family through any kind of familialistic policy, to a form of 'supported familialism,' where the family is predominantly supported through a range of financial measures. This model, however, is uniquely marked by a paradoxical policy approach, in which conservative family understanding and gender politics go hand in hand with an increasing emphasis on care issues, despite a significant shortage of public provision and mainly through consolidating the role of the family in care provision. (p. 133)

2.2.5. Professional Women Leaving Work After Becoming Mothers

The primary focus throughout this research is why working mothers in professional and managerial positions came to the point that they left their jobs or gave a career break in order to take over childcare responsibility. Hence, it was crucial to point out discussions on motherhood, women's employment and work-life balance to provide a background for the opting-out debate. Opting out, in this case, is directly related to professional women's experience of work and motherhood, and precisely their problems in terms of childcare, parental leave policies and traditional gender roles.

The concept of opting out refers to "moms who decide to leave the workforce to take care of children" (Palmer, 2014). As mentioned previously, opting out may emerge as

one of the strategies developed by women in order to reconcile work and family life—“the strategy of exit” (Williams, 2018, p. 128). The main tendency has been to consider this phenomenon as an elite practice that concerns only white-middle-class women because they were assumed to have the right to choose while the others had no alternative. Contrarily, while it is open to discussion whether all women have the ‘luxury’ of choosing to leave the workforce, the concept of choice is also disputable. Many women from different ethnic and racial groups from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds also hover between staying home or going to work, such as Black mothers in Britain and Canada (Hamilton, 2020). Also, when studied, two groups mainly emerged—mothers with low-income jobs who cannot afford to pay for childcare, so they opt-out to provide care themselves, and mothers with high family resources so they can give up their own earnings by leaving work (Cheeseman Day & Downs, 2009). Hence, it is crucial to raise questions on the nature of the opting-out phenomenon for all because it often applies to many more cases than thought.

2.3. Discussions on Opting-Out of Work

In the early 2000s, a new phenomenon came to light in the US.—where highly trained; professional women have been leaving their jobs after becoming mothers (Belkin, 2003; Wallis, 2004; Story, 2005). At first, it was identified as a revolution in which career-oriented women started to leave the workforce voluntarily to stay home taking care of their kids. With the accumulation of new research and studies on the issue, it has come to the point that the case is not that simple. In fact, besides the arrangement of care, the pressures in the workplace towards mothers were mainly the motivations behind these mothers’ decisions (Stone, 2007). Such pressures stemmed from the bias against pregnancy and maternity, which is now regarded as discrimination against working mothers. Also, the workplace is incompatible with parenting, leading these women to choose between their jobs and their children. In line with these arguments, the findings from a comparative study in the US., Britain and Japan show that there is a strong effect of young children on mothers’ employment (Waldfogel et al., 1999). Thus, it is debatable whether opting out is a choice that women make freely or a penalty faced mainly by women. The studies show that “opting out is a gendered process: over the past two decades, 18 to 20 per cent of mothers did not work for pay in order to care for children for one or more years, compared to peak rate of only about

1.2 per cent among fathers” (Flood et al., 2015, as cited in Weisshaar, 2018, p. 35). Nevertheless, the number of studies on opting out is limited, especially in sociological and feminist research.

Hence, this social phenomenon has various significant implications on the families, but especially on the lives of these women. For instance, that women change their jobs into less demanding ones “is accompanied by a decrease in autonomy at work, which could indicate that motherhood is sanctioned by less challenging work” (Laurijssen & Glorieux, 2013, p. 434). When it comes to returning to work after opting out for a certain period, the research found that opted-out fathers and mothers are less likely to be hired compared to unemployed candidates because of the violation of the ideal worker norm, and this is even more evident for fathers (Weisshaar, 2018). This is because fathers are expected to conform to the demands of the labour market as well as the social norms about fatherhood instead of being a caregiver. These are crucial points since they all demonstrate the gendered characteristic of opting out as a social phenomenon.

2.3.1. The Case of Turkey

So, why do women opt out of work in Turkey? There might be different cultural, social and structural reasons or motivations why women leave work after becoming mothers, which is the main research question of this study. One thing is sure that in line with the findings of other research on other countries, it is suggested that women’s fertility and employment are negatively correlated in Turkey, mainly due to “the incompatibility of women’s roles as worker and mother” (Özgören et al., 2018, p. 1267). Cultural reasons behind this may refer to socially constructed norms and values on motherhood and work. For example, the idea that women should become mothers and then devote themselves to their children implies that work interferes with this ideal type of mothering is a solid ideological myth internalised by the members of society. Thus, this may result in motherhood guilt for working mothers, who may feel obliged to take care of their children themselves to fulfil their mothering roles. A social reason is maybe not having any social support mechanisms to provide care, such as extended family members of parents, which is a typical pattern in child care in Turkey. This has been demonstrated as “in Turkey, the proportion of working mothers who take care of

their children under 6 years of age is 28% and the rate of grandmothers is 17%” (Kapuçugil-İkiz, 2015, as cited in Akyol & Arslan, 2020, p. 266). In addition, the results from the survey *Public Perception of Gender and Women in Turkey* conducted in 2022 by The Kadir Has University Gender and Women's Studies Research indicated that women quit their jobs primarily due to marriage/domestic responsibilities and lack of childcare support (GWSRC, 2022). Further, structural reasons may vary from the organisation of work to the legislative framework of a country. It might be so hard to adapt to the organisation of high-intensity workplaces that are intolerant to workers with children and expect too much compared to family-friendly workplaces. The lack of inclusive parental leave policies and that gendered social policies encourage mothers to take up caregiving while discouraging fathers are structural, legislative-level problems. Thus, these problems occur not only through traditional gender roles but also through the existing state policies. The social construction of motherhood serves as a welfare mechanism by ensuring that mothers are mainly responsible for childcare. Parental leave almost exclusively refers to maternity leave, and it is primarily mothers who take unpaid leave. These may result in mothers’ career breaks or opting out of work—which might reiterate discrimination against mothers in the forms of motherhood wage penalty or mommy track which impedes mothers’ career development. The illusion of the mommy track is that flexibility or temporarily leaving work is promoted as an asset for working mothers, but it becomes a form of penalty.

These reasons and many more may lead women to leave their careers. These reasons might cluster around the category of work-family conflict. A recent study on the issue found a significant effect of work-life conflict on the intention to leave for working women (Göktaş Kulualp & Savaşkan, 2019). Nevertheless, according to Akyol and Arslan (2020), when studied, motherhood is still the number one priority for working mothers; and they still embrace the intensive motherhood ideology. This demonstrates how strong the motherhood ideology is in Turkey. In this sense, while both can be conflicting, motherhood as an ideology can surpass the ideal worker ideology after working women become working mothers. Hence, realising they cannot fulfil their duties as mothers while working full-time can prompt them to leave their employee identities since they cannot ‘leave’ motherhood. Research from Zahmacioğlu et al. found that professional women who voluntarily left their jobs after having children

direct their working ideals to motherhood—making motherhood a “profession” or a project which they try to perform perfectly without any mistakes, ultimately serving their feelings of inadequacy (2015).

So what happens after women opt out? While the impacts of leaving paid work and taking over care work on personal life, self-image, and identity are apparent such as mothers’ feeling of inadequacy (Zahmacıoğlu et al., 2015), there are also implications for society. If more and more parents withdraw from the labour market, employers encourage norms that hinder the labour force participation of parents in general (Weisshaar, 2018). This is especially critical for women’s labour force participation, and also it reinforces the glass ceiling, considering the already-in-place underrepresentation of women in managerial work and leadership positions (UN, 2020). Also, such career breaks in the working life of women would harm their careers. In addition, the more the leave is extended, the lower the possibility of a mother finding a job, especially in managerial and leadership positions. In light of these arguments, it is not surprising to argue that opting out is a gendered social phenomenon that should be explained through the feminist framework. It is also highly controversial, considering the motivations behind mothers’ opting out are emphasised through personal choice or social reasons. Hence, it was nicely put to reveal such an intertwined relationship when Orgad (2019) referred to the decision to head home as “forced choices.”

All in all, opting out is a topic of research that emerged two decades ago, and several studies have been accumulated since then. However, there are still a limited number of studies on women, specifically mothers’ opting out of work, especially in Turkey. Mainly, opting out as a topic is included in work-life balance literature and tackled as an extension of work-life conflict. This study aims at providing a more encompassing picture of the issue of opting out, making connections to motherhood ideology that affects mothers’ choices and gender inequalities within the household as well as in the state policies. In the case of Turkey, with the state familialism that constitutes the base of the existing social policies and the conservative culture that perpetuates the traditional gender roles, mothers’ opting out becomes more than an issue of choice. Thus, narrating lived experiences of mothers who opted out of work is significant for illuminating the issue.

2.4. Conclusion

This chapter aimed to provide a comprehensive picture of motherhood, women's work, and mothers' opting out of work in general and with a specific focus on Turkey. This chapter presents the main issues, debates, and existing studies on mothers' opting out of work. The feminist discussions on motherhood and women's employment and care work are assessed as crucial aspects of opting out literature. How motherhood operates as a social institution and motherhood ideologies connected to mothers' opting out of work are analysed as one of the research questions of the study. Further, given that opting out debate is accompanied mainly by work-life balance (WLB) literature, the main relevant studies and findings on the issue are presented. The existing studies showed that women, especially in Turkey, experience a great deal of work-life conflict. Hence, since the main research objective is to study the opting-out phenomenon, a section on opting out in its own right is provided. Motherhood ideologies, gendered division of labour in domestic and care work, and work-life conflict are discussed as the main contributors to mothers' opting out of work. Ultimately, opting out is challenged as a gendered practice rather than an individual choice. Throughout this chapter, feminist theory and its criticisms of patriarchy, gender inequality, women's oppression, and women's secondary position constituted the main theoretical and conceptual framework.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

3.1. Research Objectives and Research Design

This thesis aims to understand why professional working women leave permanently or for a certain period of time after having children in Turkey. This study intends to investigate and analyse the reasons behind leaving work—as the social phenomenon of opting out, a relatively common yet unexplored practice among working women in Turkey. This study not only presents the reasons which lead these mothers to leave work but also intends to explore how they experience the post-job-childcare process and how they deal with it. Both the pre-children and post-work periods are highly significant in understanding their experiences as a whole. Thus, the main research question, followed by two sub-questions, are:

- Why do well-educated, white-collar, professional women opt out of work after becoming mothers in Turkey? What are the social, structural, and cultural factors behind these women's decision to leave work?
- What are the implications of opting out of work on the lives of these mothers?
- How are the social phenomenon of mothers' opting out of work and motherhood ideology related?

As I have been interested in women's labour both in private and public spaces throughout my undergraduate and graduate studies, and as I have encountered working mothers struggling between work and home around me, choosing to study such a topic occurred naturally to me. Since there has not been enough study on working mothers' leaving work, especially on professional women in Turkey, this study aimed at fulfilling this gap and contributing to the existing literature by presenting the case of Turkey. Moreover, answering the question of why these women, in particular, decide

to leave their careers and take over childcare on their own is one of the main contributions of this study.

When it comes to the research design, since this study aims to understand the experience of a group of people, the qualitative research method was the most suitable way for conducting this study. Qualitative research is used specifically when the research aims to understand how a group of individuals—5 to 25 individuals, share common experiences of a certain phenomenon (Creswell, 2007). Thus, conducting qualitative research on this topic to understand the issue from a sociological and feminist perspective was perfectly suited to the research objectives.

In order to explore the issue on a deeper level while keeping the interviews on topic simultaneously, semi-structured interviews are chosen as the data collection method of the study. Semi-structured interviews enable the researcher to get open-ended answers while at the same time helping guide the interviews and stay focused on the objectives of the study. The interview questionnaire comprised 15 demographic and 40 open-ended questions, with a total of 55 questions. The interview questions are divided into seven themes: demographic information, working life, leaving work/post-work life, division of labour/childcare in the household, social circle, opinions on childcare, perceptions on motherhood and motherhood discourse. The themes on paid and unpaid domestic work are essential mainly to reveal their experiences in work-life balance. The themes of social circle and perceptions of motherhood and motherhood discourse serve to analyse the relationship between motherhood ideology and opting out of work. Such thematisation helped keep the researcher organised according to the research interests. I prepared the interview questions as clearly as possible but provided additional clarifications when the participants needed them. In fact, I received positive feedback regarding the comprehensiveness of the interview questions from some participants.

3.2. Data Collection

In this study, snowball sampling was used since the sample consisted of specific characteristics, such as mothers who are university graduates, who were working in professional jobs before leaving work and who have at least three years of work experience before leaving. Snowball sampling is finding a research sample “through

referrals made among people who share or know of others who possess some characteristics that are of research interest” (Biernacki & Waldorf, 1981, p. 141). Hence, it is a very useful sampling method, especially for sociological research, as it lets sampling be based on “interactional units” (Coleman, 1958: Biernacki & Waldorf, 1981). In order to test the questions, a pilot study was conducted prior to the main qualitative study. I conducted 4 pilot and 16 main interviews, so the number of respondents reached was a total of 20. Pilot interviews were conducted to assess the feasibility of the study and to pre-test the interview questionnaire. While the aim was to identify potential problem areas for the study, the pilot interviews showed that the questions worked well and served to get answers to the main research questions. I reached the first respondents through my social network and family connections by asking people if they knew someone who might be eligible for the research characteristics. After I found two participants by referrals of friends of my family and friends, I asked those participants if they knew other mothers who shared the same experience with them. A respondent of the study, a colleague of my sister’s friend, helped me a lot; they referred me to a new participant and suggested reaching blogger moms to ask them to share the research announcement. I asked those blogger moms when they accepted and shared the announcement, and many people reached out to me themselves, and I found 9 of the participants from those people. 8 out of 20 participants in total were found from my own family’s and friends’ network. Five people did not participate in the study even if they volunteered. They reached out to me stating they wanted to participate in the study; however, some of them did not return to my texts and others were unable to schedule an appointment stating that they did not have the time. In that case, I continued to search for new participants through my friend and family ties. I was in touch with the last possible participant, a friend of my mother’s friend, from the start to the end of the fieldwork. When I stated that we could conduct the interview through Zoom if scheduling a face-to-face appointment was more difficult, she stated that participating from home was even more difficult. She said that “The work does not end at home. Delayed works on one side, the child on the other, and housework.” Thus, this even showed the work-life conflict experienced by possible participants. After we could not schedule a date for the interview, we found another participant from my mother’s network as quickly as possible and then I ended the fieldwork with the number of 16 participants.

In this research, the crucial point was to understand women's own experiences through their own words. Thus, I prepared open-ended questions as elaborately as possible to get comprehensive answers regarding their lives. In this sense, the interview questionnaire consisted of semi-structured and demographic questions. Apart from demographic data, which is necessary for all studies to present a background on the characteristics of the research participants, the aim was to discover these mothers' lived experiences, their personal lives and their own perceptions of the issue rather than providing statistical information. Hence, I considered what I wanted to learn regarding mothers' quitting work while preparing the interview questions. I analysed the research questions throughout the field study to see whether they were actually working on the field, yet I thought there was no need for revision. The participants were very eager and helpful in telling their opinions in detail, so I am thankful to them for that. However, since the research topic falls in the work-life balance and social policy literature, it should be noted that a more quantitative analysis of the relationship between individuals' socioeconomic status and work-life balance is also significant for further studies on this topic.

Due to COVID-19, sociological research has witnessed a change in conducting qualitative fieldwork. As online tools such as Zoom became very much embedded in our social and working life, they also started to be used as methods for conducting research. Since the research sample consists of white-collar working women and some of them work remotely, they all had internet access, and they had experience with using Zoom, Skype, WhatsApp, and Facetime, I was able to conduct the interviews via Zoom. In most of the interviews, we used Zoom, but in some cases, when there was a connection problem, we switched to the mobile phone call. Out of 16 interviews, nine were conducted via Zoom, four were conducted via phone, and three were face-to-face. On average, the interviews took approximately 50 minutes, ranging from 40 to 120 minutes. Some of them said they were so happy to be given the opportunity to speak up on this issue, so some interviews lasted longer than 1 hour.

Before starting the fieldwork, I had some concerns about finding participants in the research, as most researchers can relate. However, my experience proved otherwise; apart from my family and friends, the participants were eager to help me find new

participants. Especially one of them suggested reaching out to blogger mothers to ask them to share the research announcement, through which I found the most participants.

I mostly had problems with the scheduling process. It took much effort to schedule a specific date and time to conduct the interview with the participants because they were taking care of their children without any breaks. Thus, I asked them to reach out to me whenever they had the time; I waited for their spare time. The mothers called me when they put their children to sleep for one or two hours, and the interviews were conducted mainly during the children's bedtimes. In some interviews, the fathers took care of the child, and in some, mothers participated with their babies. Thus, conducting interviews via Zoom or phone call was more suitable for participants to make the time for the interviews instead of meeting face-to-face. Thus, one advantage of online interview methods is that they are time-saving. Also, another advantage is that I did not face spatial constraints and could reach many people from all over Turkey since we could meet online. However, a disadvantage of online interview methods might be related to an internet connection as the sometimes poor connection can disrupt the interview. In that case, switching to a phone call was the most convenient way of continuing the interviews. Another disadvantage is that online interview methods are limited in giving clues about participants' facial expressions and body language. Hence, whether the questions are answered genuinely by the participants raises concerns about the limitations of the study.

3.3. Research Sample

The objective of this study is to understand why professional women who specialised in a career path through education and job experience leave their jobs after becoming mothers and how they experience this process in particular. Prior to the main study, a pilot study with four participants was conducted to assess the feasibility of the main study, and to pre-test the interview questionnaire. As the sample size of qualitative research consists of 5 to 25 individuals (Creswell, 2007), in-depth interviews were conducted with 16 participants. Out of the 16 participants, 11 permanently left work, and five were on unpaid leave. While it is highly likely that permanently leaving work has implications for women's career paths, taking unpaid leave also signals to give a career break, which also has potential consequences on women's work. Since it is a

common practice for women to take unpaid leave after having children in Turkey, this study also aimed to highlight the gendered aspects of leave policies. Thus, the research sample consists of 16 participants, and their demographic characteristics and general profiles are provided below (see table 1 and table 2).

Table 1. Interviewee Profiles

No	Age	Education Level	Occupation	Work Experience by year	# of Child	Age of Children	Type of leave	Duration ¹	Current Situation
1	30	MS	Psychologist	8	1	1	Unpaid leave	10 months	On leave
2	40	BS	Organizational Manager	9	2	7 and 10	Permanent	10 years	Unemployed
3	31	MS	Psychologist	7	1	1.5	Unpaid leave	7 months	Returned
4	41	PhD (ongoing)	Finance and Treasury Specialist	17	2	6 and 12	Unpaid leave + Permanent	2 years leave + 1 year permanent	Employed
5	35	BS	Banker	10	1	1.5	Unpaid leave	2 years	On leave
6	35	MS (ongoing)	Senior Expert / Mechanical Engineer	13	1	3	Permanent	2 years	Freelance working
7	37	BS	Project Manager / Industrial Engineer	15	2	1 and 5	Unpaid leave	2 years prior + 1 year current	On leave
8	33	MS	Human Resources Specialist	11	1	4	Permanent	2.5 years	Unemployed
9	35	MS	Geophysics Engineer	10	1	4	Unpaid leave	1 year	On leave
10	36	BS	Chief Reporter / Director	13	1	2	Unpaid leave + Permanent	1 year	Freelance working
11	41	MS	Mid-Level Project Manager	18	1	6	Permanent	4 years	Freelance working
12	33	BS	Editor-in-chief	6	1	1.5	Permanent	1 year	Unemployed
13	41	MS	Teacher	18	1	3.5	Permanent	1.5 year	Employed
14	53	AS	Public Relations Specialist	19	1	20	Permanent	5 years prior + 7 years current	Unemployed
15	36	MS	Project Manager	6	1	5	Permanent	4 years	Employed
16	39	BS	Office Manager	9	2	7 and 8	Permanent	2 years	Employed

¹ Duration refers to the time passed after the participants left work until the time of the interviews. In some instances, durations are specified for both unpaid and permanent leave for the same participants.

- The average age of mothers at the time of interviews is 37.
- The average age of marriage of participants is 27.
- The average age of participants when they had their first child is 32.
- The average age of participants when they had their second child is 34.
- 12 participants have only one child, 4 participants have two children.
- The average age of first children is 6, and the average age of second children is 9.
- All of the participants hold at least an associate degree. 1 participant holds associate degree, 6 participants hold bachelor's degree. 9 out of 16 participants are either enrolled in or completed a graduate degree.
- All participants were married.
- The average year of work experience of participants is 12 years.
- 11 out of 16 participants left the workforce permanently and 5 of them are on unpaid leave.
- The time passed after leaving work at the time of interviews (by August 2022) for the participants range from 7 months to 10 years. In average, for participants who left the workforce permanently, the time passed after they left work is 3 years.
- For the partners of the participants, the average year of work experience is 17 years. 3 of the partners hold associate degree, 10 partners hold bachelor's degree and 3 partners hold master's degree. They all work in professional jobs; for example, 4 of them are engineers.
- All participants are citizens of the Republic of Turkey and 15 of them living in Turkey whereas 1 participant is living in Germany. The participants are from cities Ankara, Aydın, Bursa, Ingolstadt (Germany), Izmir, Istanbul, Kocaeli, Manisa, Ordu, and Samsun. 4 participants live in Istanbul, 3 participants live in Ankara and 1 participant live in Izmir. Thus, 11 out of 16 participants are living in metropolitan cities.
- Apart from educational levels and occupations, income levels of the participants are presented in order to provide information on participants' socioeconomic status. In order to make sense of participants' socioeconomic status, the household monthly average income of participants were divided into intervals and grouped (see at table 2). All households were nuclear family households, only 4 out of 16 consisting of four members.

Table 2. Income Range

Level	Participants
1	7
2	1
3	4
4	4
5	0

Table 3. Household Monthly Income

Income Range	Level
0-10.000 TRY	5
10.000-15.000 TRY	4
15.000-20.000 TRY	3
20.000-35.000 TRY	2
35.000 and above TRY	1

According to Income and Living Conditions Survey conducted by TURKSTAT in 2021 and published in 2022, mean annual equivalised household disposable income in one-family households were calculated as 38 thousand 159 TRY per person per year, which means 3 thousand 179 TRY per person per month (TURKSTAT, 2022b). While the numbers can be misleading given the high inflation rates in Turkey in 2022, it is possible to say that the income levels of the majority of the participants' in this study are mid-high and high by being above average (see table 3).

3.4. Data Analysis

In the scope of this study, the aim was to reveal common patterns and bring up the mothers' unique experiences. Thus, in the data analysis process, the aim was to grasp common patterns in accordance with the themes of the questionnaire—which are

demographic information, working life, leaving work/post-work life, division of labour/childcare in the household, social circle, opinions on childcare, perceptions on motherhood and motherhood discourse. Also, mothers' experiences were compared and contrasted, especially regarding the type of leave they had. Permanent and temporary unpaid leave revealed common and different patterns of mothers' opting out of work. I transcribed the voice recordings of the interviews and used them for the data analysis so that any information would not be missed and be able to make a thematic analysis through written text.

Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), in which the narratives from the data are analysed and divided into themes that represent the subject matter of interest (Creswell, 2014), is used as the data analysis method. After the data analysis, three overarching themes were revealed on why professional women left work after becoming mothers, which are analysed in detail in chapter 4. Also, it was possible to reach and generate certain concepts and keywords. One evident concept was *the mental burden (zihinsel yük) of the household and care arrangements*—meaning that the mother carries the mental burden of the household operation; they are responsible for the operation of the household even if they do not perform physical labour. This was referred to as a problem for several participants, and some of them used the exact words “mental burden,” so the conceptualisation process was based on their own words. Several of them also used the words *operation* and *organization* of the household, which was adapted as *arrangement*. Moreover, the mothers' control over the care work, mentioned by several mothers, was referred to as “maternal gatekeeping”—a concept that has already been used in social science. Maternal gatekeeping comes across with a combination of maternal guilt—referring mostly a “working mom guilt” (Epp & Velagaleti, 2004) in this study. Also, nostalgia for working life was one of the patterns reached after the data analysis of the research.

3.5. Reflexivity

As a feminist who is trying to contribute to feminist literature by studying an issue that interests women, I think the researcher's own position and subjectivity are essential components of a study. First, it starts with why I chose this as the thesis topic. Growing up, my mother was also a working mother who struggled to balance work and her three

children at home. She had to retire early to care for my brother because she was hovering between work and home. While the decision seemed to be my mother's own choice, I realised there was something there—that the reasons why my mother retired early were more structural and social rather than personal. Moreover, the socially constructed gender roles which profoundly manifest themselves in the division of labour within the household and care work had always disturbed me in a way that I felt obliged to do something to challenge this. Thus, choosing to study this issue for my master's thesis became my way of doing something. Hence, prior to the research, I thought that women were facing problems and struggling in terms of work-life balance, that there was an unequal division of labour within the household, and that issues related to childcare became an obstacle for women's work. All of which meant that I had certain opinions on the issue before and during the research. Indeed, this has affected how the research is designed and conducted; however, I doubt that a feminist researcher can or should hold an utterly objective approach towards issues that are, one way or another, related to unequal gender relations. As Harding (1992) argues on feminist standpoint theory, “starting off research from women's lives will generate less partial and distorted accounts, not only of women's lives but also of men's lives and of the whole social order” (p. 445).

3.6. Ethical Concerns of the Study

Ethical permission for the study is obtained from the METU Human Research Ethics Committee. All information regarding the scope, the objectives, the data collection and analysis of the study, and the interview questionnaire, were presented to the committee. An informed consent form was prepared to be presented to the respondents, so they could consent to participate in the study. Before each interview, the respondents were informed about the researcher and the research. They were informed that their interviews were being recorded, yet their identities were kept confidential, and they had the right to leave the study whenever they wished. Respondents were asked to sign the informed consent form in three face-to-face interviews. In seventeen online and phone-call interviews, respondents were asked to give verbal consent, and their answers were recorded.

3.7. Limitations and Strengths

As with any research, this research has its own strengths and limitations. One possible limitation is that the sample may be too educated because it consists of women from higher-ranking jobs, mostly those in managerial positions. Thus, there might be concerns about the representativeness of this study. Thus, this study's findings cannot apply to the case of blue-collar workers and working-class mothers. There is a need for further studies on this topic, comprising working mothers from different backgrounds and socioeconomic statuses.

Furthermore, the research sample consists of all women married with men. Their families are nuclear families comprising a mother, a father and children. Thus, this study is based on the gender binary and heteronormative construction of family, which can also be a limitation of this research. Moreover, one point can be both a limitation and a strength, which I prefer the latter. The lack of generalizability in qualitative studies is often regarded as a limitation in social research. As with most other qualitative studies, this study also cannot be used as a tool for generalisation as it consists of a small sample with qualitative data. Although this study's sample size (N=16) is sufficient for qualitative research, it cannot be expected from this sample to present a general picture of all women or mothers who opted out from work as a whole. However, generalizability as part of the conclusion has not been one of the claims of this qualitative study in the first place. In fact, bringing up unique narratives of each woman is one of the significant contributions of feminist research, especially in challenging positivist methodologies. As "the lack of generalizability as an asset of feminist and post-structural research, rather than a limitation, because it creates a space of resistance against positivist research methodologies" (St. Pierre, 2016, as cited in Freeman, 2019, p. 10).

Moreover, conducting online interviews can be regarded as both a limitation and a strength. Despite the main tendency that regards online interviewing as a limitation, I experienced that the virtual research methods are very beneficial for both the researcher and the participants. By means of online interviewing, I was able to reach women from all over Turkey. Also, since the respondents did not have to spare extra time for meeting face-to-face, online interviewing increased the availability of the

participants despite the limited time they had in their lives. However, when it comes to the concerns over the benefits of face-to-face communication, it should be noted that online interview methods are limited in giving clues about participants' facial expressions and body language. Hence, these methods raise concerns about whether the questions are answered genuinely by the participants, which becomes excluded from the observation of the researcher.

The effect of COVID-19 on the thesis can also be regarded as both a limitation and a strength. The fact that the field took place right after the Covid-19 pandemic period made the pandemic one of the themes of this thesis. Most participants referred to the lockdown period when they talked about being at home, child care, and remote working. Thus, although the initial research objective does not include the effects of COVID-19 on mothers' experience of leaving work and child care, I had to consider the pandemic as a factor in the lives of these women. This might be a strength in that they were able to mention the impact of COVID-19 and the lockdown period on the division of labour and child care within the household. However, it is also considered a limitation when the participants' narratives highly relied on what they had experienced during the pandemic since the main focus of this thesis is not the effect of Covid-19 on the lives of the participants.

As a strength, it can be said that professional women leaving work after becoming mothers is a relatively undiscovered area in the work-life balance literature, especially in Turkey; therefore, the particular contribution itself poses one crucial strength of the study.

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The main findings from the research will be presented in this chapter, along with a discussion of the findings. This chapter consists of the analysis of data obtained from the 16 interviews conducted with the participants. The demographic findings of research participants was analysed in the methodology chapter in advance. In this chapter, the results derived from the seven themes that primarily constituted the interviews will be presented. Moreover, the three overarching themes revealed by the findings on the main research question of the study—the reasons why professional women leave work after becoming mothers, will be discussed in detail. Also, key findings of the study, which comprise the main research question and two sub-questions, will be presented. The findings of this study cover the common patterns in mothers' experiences as well as their diverse and unique experiences.

4.1. Working Life Before Children

All participants have asked about their duties and responsibilities in the workplace, working conditions and workload, and whether they had problems balancing work and their personal lives before they had children. All of the women were white-collar professional workers and managers who had managerial duties and responsibilities in the workplace to varying degrees. 10 participants were directly working as managers or specialists by job definition, having mainly executive and organisational responsibilities for themselves and their teams. The remaining six of them were working as professionals with varying administrative roles. For example, the interviewee 12 was the editor-in-chief.

As for the working conditions before children, they stated that work used to take up most of the day, so they allocated their time majorly to work. Two bank employees

stated that they used to work 12-13 hours a day without any overtime pay because overtime regulations are newly emerging in Turkey, and implementation is still a significant problem. Participants who were working in organisations that did not protect their labour rights were predominantly the ones who complained about an imbalance between work and their personal lives. Other than that, not everyone felt the existence of such imbalance in a childless life. In fact, in the case of managers, most of them stated that they had been working too much and frequently overtime. Yet, they were happy about the situation as long as they felt job satisfaction and commitment to the organisation:

No, I am not complaining; I love working as long as I have job satisfaction. My husband did not complain about this either. I used to travel abroad as well, which I enjoyed very much. For me, in a childless life, my work and personal life were in balance. (interviewee 9)

Some of them were voluntarily working extra hours, at night and weekends, so that they become better in their jobs. Almost all of them stated in any chance how much they love to work, to be productive and to be rewarded for their efforts both financially and spiritually. Working was a big part of their lives, one of their main identities:

Since it is an institution that protects the employee, there were not such inhumane working conditions. But since I like to do everything down to the last detail, I was creating my own workload. I loved taking on new projects and new responsibilities. If you ask a different person working in the same institution, they might say it was very comfortable and we would work 9-6. But I was on the side that loved the intensity and wanted to do more. It was not too busy for me to handle. But I did not turn off my computer and leave. Afterwards, I was always doing something and trying hard to improve myself. (interviewee 11)

Nevertheless, two participants stated that their overtime working and travelling for work had a negative impact on their married life, causing them to switch jobs. Especially one of them was experiencing “downshifting” before permanently leaving work:

Since the working conditions were intense, I couldn't make it work along with the marriage. I was leaving work very late, travelling and so on. I quit a few months after I got married, then started again, and then quit after my daughter was born. I worked in the office at my latest job and didn't take part in a lot of out-of-town duties. Again, the determining factor was my marriage because I couldn't travel as I did when I was single.

Working in the office doesn't seem that much fun to me. I didn't enjoy the second stage as I previously worked actively in the field, but it was still a job I loved. (interviewee 2)

For a childless married couple, that couples work in the same institution or they have the same occupation makes a big difference in the perceptions of work-life balance. Women whose husbands work in the same organisation regarded this as an advantage in reconciling work-life conflict and creating a more egalitarian relationship. However, their husbands and families were supportive of their work despite their busy schedules because they were aware of the importance of their careers in the lives of these women. Most of them stated that their husbands encourage them to work or return to work after a period, which is analysed in the following chapters.

4.2. Once I Became a Mother

Generally, the participants highlighted the difference between the periods of before and after children in terms of work-life balance. In this sense, getting married and having children come across as milestones in their lives. For almost all of them, work commitment diminished after having children. One reason, the central tendency among participants, is that their priorities change after having children. Comparing work and motherhood seems pointless because their children become their number one priority. They come to a point where they have to make a comparison between work and motherhood, choosing one over another. This comparison is mainly because work and motherhood occupy almost the entire day. Hence, they regard the time they allocate to work as the time they steal or take away from their children. The perception of time changes once they become mothers. A mother's time means a child's time, so every minute they are not taking care of their children comes with a sense of guilt.

I felt that I couldn't spare time for my child because I worked so hard. As a result, I started to feel that my child needed me. (interviewee 6)

When the workload becomes inhumane, you have to quit something and it's either career or education, of course you have to prioritize the child. We had a babysitter at home, but this also has to do with my work, so I blamed myself for a long time, I felt guilty. When I quit my job, I said that I'm going to give them and myself back the time I stole from them. (Interviewee 4)

I bought time by quitting my job. And I never regret buying my daughter's time. (interviewee 11)

Hence, the emphasis on guilt because of the lack of time they spare for children is one crucial point that is repeated by the majority of the mothers, especially the mid-level and senior-level managers.

Becoming a mother affected them in many aspects. It was evident in most cases that their career had been affected directly, but also, there were personal and social implications. Almost all participants highlighted the importance of allocating time for themselves, which became nearly impossible after having children.

Moreover, it is certain that women's careers are greatly affected once they become a mother. For these mothers, having children often meant the end of their careers. For several of the mothers interviewed, it meant 'downshifting'—which refers to “purposefully slow or scale down one's professional advancement by reducing their workload and working hours with the goal of improving their work-life balance” (Downshifting: Definition, Process, and Examples, 2022). Especially one of the mothers experiencing downshifting due to motherhood expresses herself as:

How motherhood affected my business life, I quit my job at the governor's office; I ended a job where I had a lot of job satisfaction, a job that I loved very much because I did not think that I would spend the pregnancy period healthy. (interviewee 9)

What is problematic is that downshifting is also gendered, as mothers are more prone to downshift than fathers (Bass, 2015). This is because when mothers downshift in their careers or leave their careers altogether, they mainly do this out of the feeling of guilt which transfers into the feeling of nostalgia for working life. Hence, in both ways, mothers are in a contradiction between work and motherhood. This once more reveals the gender inequalities both in the labour market and in the family.

4.3. The Motherhood Penalty

Another reason behind decreasing work commitment is related to the discrimination and mobbing they encountered due to being pregnant or a mother. Hence, many of the women I interviewed experienced the motherhood penalty in different ways. They faced direct or indirect discrimination from pregnancy to becoming a mother. After

women got pregnant, employers assumed they were unwilling to work or could not perform well anymore. This resulted in becoming estranged from one's labour and workplace.

After I got pregnant, they started asking questions like, "You would not come back after giving birth, right?" I said no, I intend to continue working. But as soon as you are pregnant, they treat you as useless anyway. (interviewee 14)

Another example of mobbing against female employees with children is that:

They say you should stay away from a woman with a child; you should not hire them. You hear these words with your own ears. This discourse on women with children is just an example. Only six months ago, my career life was excellent; I was receiving awards on senior executive candidate projects, so what happened? When I was being shown as one of the stars of the company, suddenly, new employers came, and my whole career was over because they said that female employees with children were not beneficial for them. (interviewee 4)

Moreover, women face penalties not only during work but also when they try to return to work after a career break as well. There is a stigma against employees who give career breaks in the labour market since it is believed to signal employees' productivity and work commitment. Working mothers are a group of people that often suffer from such kind of stigma.

I wanted to return to work. There is a big difference between a young single person applying and someone with a child applying. You go to interviews, and they say, "Oh, you have kids? Hmm." I've always been turned down like this. (interviewee 14)

Furthermore, the glass ceiling is persistent together with the mommy track. Becoming a mother can result in downshifting in various ways. Also, motherhood becomes an obstacle for women on the career ladder. For instance, at banks, when a worker requests a transfer due to spouse-related reasons, they make the worker sign that they accept transferring to a lower position. This enforcement mainly causes women to fall behind because it is usually women who request transfers to where their husbands work in Turkey. Also, when an employee takes unpaid leave, they return to a lower position:

So, after working as an operation assistant for about six years, I had to work as a desk assistant. Since now I have taken unpaid leave after birth,

again, they make me return to a lower position. So, if you are giving birth, here is your punishment. You climb and climb; they push you back to start over. That is why, for example, there are very few women managers; how can there be? (interviewee 5)

Hence, these women were subjected to motherhood penalty in various ways. Indeed, such experiences have damaging impacts not only on their working life but personal life as well as their well-being.

4.4. Domestic and Care Work

It is indicated by ILO that unpaid care work was performed by women in the form of child and elderly care by more than 75 per cent in 2018, and this was even aggravated by the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic (Zandt, 2022). The findings of this study revealed a typical pattern on the issue. Except for the three participants who stated that their husbands play an equal part in childcare, the remaining 13 claimed that the fathers' role in childcare was mainly limited to play. Fathers fulfil the playmate role for the children, whereas they fulfil the primary care. Fathers do not necessarily feel responsible for the children's primary needs; rather, they provide additional support to mothers when they are not available to do so. Other than that, it comes across as asking a favour from fathers to expect them to participate in the children's primary care. When the children grow older and start walking around the age of 1-1.5, fathers become more involved in childcare, fulfilling the play and social needs of the children.

My husband takes an active role in childcare when the child grows up. He provides support when I say I feel very tired, please give me a hand. But it's more like giving the child to the father in their most calm and pleased condition; then meeting my needs and taking them back. (interviewee 7)

My husband will do anything if you ask. He loves playing with children. But overall, the responsibility is on me. I prefer to do thing by myself. I don't let others to do the work, I don't trust them. (interviewee 2)

When asked about the reasons behind mothers taking over the responsibility of caregiving, especially of primary care, three reasons were apparent—biological dimension such as breastfeeding, mothers' higher capability compared to fathers, and fathers' paid work.

Because of my husband's work. If I was working, I would say I have a job too. But when you are not working, I think that role directly sticks to you.

Because he says “I have a job, I am in a meeting.” They somehow retreat into their own territory and protect it. But since you don't have a job, I think you get that role right away. (interviewee 9)

Regarding the unpaid domestic work, the participants mainly stated that there was a shared division of labour in the household. The mothers did not do all the household chores, but they mostly performed more tasks than their partners. One striking finding was that men are primarily responsible for the tasks belonging to the outside world, such as taking out the garbage. For example, men usually go to the market, but when an online grocery order is needed, it is the women's job. This is in line with the existing studies that indicated that the contribution of men to housework in Turkey is through doing household chores related to the outside world (GWSRC, 2022). This finding gives meaningful clues on how the public sphere is occupied predominantly by men and the private sphere by women.

When we compare the pre-work and post-work periods in terms of division of labour within the household, some of the participants argued that they did not experience any change; some stated that their domestic workload increased because ‘they were already at home’; and some others stated that their husbands take over the domestic responsibilities since they are occupied with childcare.

The discourse on the division of labour is also critical, because men's role in domestic and care work is defined on the basis of help, not responsibility:

When you go to work, everyone takes their plate and puts it in the machine, or they help prepare and clean the table. But when you quit your job and you are at home, it becomes your duty. Nobody takes their plate from the table. Because it is your job now, as if you're obliged to do it because you're at home. Of course it changed a lot after I quit my job. The person who works outside brings home the money, and as if you are responsible for the house completely. (interviewee 2)

Last but not least, one of the repeated problems by most of the mothers interviewed is that they are saddled with the bulk of the organization of the household, which can be operationalized as *the mental burden (zihinsel yük) of the household and care arrangements*, in their own words. The mothers stated that even if they do not physically perform caregiving and household chores, how and when these would be done is still the responsibility of the women. Issues involving family and home are

always in the back of their minds. They are primarily expected to regulate these issues and to provide guidance to their husbands. For instance, even if they do not do the actual cooking, the mothers always arrange the cooking process—what to be cooked and how, and they always prepare the shopping list as well as online grocery shopping. Moreover, even if they do not clean the house and get professional cleaning support, deciding when to get support or make the call is still the responsibility of these women. In the matter of childcare, fathers do not take the initiative when there is a decision to make or an arrangement for the children. Fathers expect to be told what to do about household duties and childcare. Hence, even if mothers do not do the actual task, they still carry the responsibility of the task in organizational and mental aspects. The striking point is that this mental burden serves both as a reason to leave work and a consequence of leaving work. Even if they do not quit their jobs and take over the caregiving responsibility, they would still be responsible for the task assignment in domestic and care work. Hence, instead of carrying the double burden—paid work and mental burden combined, leaving paid work seems more convenient. However, when they leave work, such mental burden regarding childcare and the operation of the household deepens; this is because of the assumption that they are now automatically responsible for the family since they no longer take place in paid work. Considering these are professional working women and women with managerial jobs and duties, they are perceived as more capable in the organization of the household and care work by their husbands, families and also by themselves. Hence, these mothers' roles as professional workers reflect their roles in domestic and care work. The household, in fact, becomes another workplace for them to practice their professional and managerial roles. Whereas this can be a voluntary practice, it is also because of the expectations of their husbands and families for the mothers.

4.5. Social Circle (Perceptions of Family Members, Co-Workers, Employers)

This theme on the social circle is critical in terms of grasping whether there are any signs of sociocultural pressure on these mothers based on employment or motherhood, motherhood penalty or mom-shaming, or any form of support. Specifically, opinions of family members might be critical in showing whether mothers are subjected to cultural ideals of mothers' working or leaving work and whether it has an effect on their decisions to quit work—by, for example, exacerbating mothers' sense of guilt.

Opinions of co-workers or employers may reveal whether mothers face motherhood penalty in the form of direct or indirect discrimination because they decide to become mothers or to leave work after becoming mothers.

It is common in Turkey that opinions and questions about getting married and having children are imposed upon young adults, especially married couples. Nearly all participants stated that they were subjected to comments and expectations about having children. Especially for couples married for a couple of years, their families, relatives, neighbours, and friends commented on when they would have children. The participants indicated that they feel very uncomfortable with the fact that people think they are entitled to interfere in other people's lives. Yet, they stated that having children was their own decision among couples, and they were not affected by the comments or expectations.

When mothers decided to take over the childcare by themselves, they were praised by family members and relatives:

They said you could do this. They appreciate it because I take care of my child mostly by myself. (interviewee 8)

Hence, the opinions of people around mothers may have an effect on to what extent they embrace intensive mothering. To praise mothers for taking care of children by themselves in the society shows the socially-defined roles attached to mothers and motherhood. This indicates how motherhood ideology operates in the level of mothers' social circle.

Almost all mothers were also subjected to comments on childcare and mothering, some of them were in the form of mom-shaming. Several of the mothers told that they were even exposed to mom-shaming by strangers they saw outside:

Let alone the family relatives, even a stranger on the road can make comments about whether the baby is cold or whether he wants something at that moment. On the bus, on the train, here and there, wherever there is a social setting, there are people who comment on and criticize your mothering. (interviewee 1)

We have a distant relative, an older man, one day he told me that I should breastfeed my child because it is healthy. Okay, I didn't have any physical constraints to breastfeed, but he didn't know that. It was so disturbing to

receive a comment from a male distant relative, like it's mansplaining. They don't make comments on my husband's fatherhood, but they make judgmental comments on what I should and should not do because I am a mother. (interviewee 12)

Most of the mothers state that they often read books on childcare so they try to apply scientific child rearing methods which they trust the most. Yet, they often receive advice based on common sense knowledge from their family members and relatives. They are repeatedly told that their methods are wrong in several occasions. Thus, they state that they are tired of mom-shaming.

There have also been various comments and opinions by family members, co-workers and employers of the participants on them becoming mothers and leaving work. Regarding the opinions of family members, several mothers were being supported in their decision; they had family members also agreeing that the best way is mothers' providing care for their children. The mothers, especially those who worked as managers and were very advanced in their career path, had trouble justifying leaving work to their families. The participants' own families, especially their mothers or fathers, objected to the decision to leave work. For these families, it is vital for a woman to have a promising career. They did not want their daughters to stay home taking care of the children because they were afraid of the 'domestication' of their daughters. These mothers grew up with the ideals of a 'career woman,' which contradicts other societal ideals such as good mothers. Thus, they were always telling themselves and their families that they would never become housewives; paid work would always be a part of their lives. This was a major concern of families in most cases. Other than that, the concerns about leaving work were financial, and families worried about how they would make a living in a single-earner household. There was not necessarily a difference between unpaid and permanent leave; both were regarded as tough decisions by family members. The attitudes of friends and co-workers of the participants towards opting out of work, the main tendency was being supportive as in both respecting their decisions and also trying to find other solutions to work-life balance and childcare problems they face so that the mothers could keep their jobs. However, some mothers received criticism from their co-workers in the workplace due to quitting for their children. These criticisms are more apparent in workplaces with high levels of competition, and sometimes they proceed to the point of mobbing. One

interesting finding is that in a competitive workplace, co-workers may support mothers leaving work just because it means they withdraw from the competition:

I also felt that one of my peers who could be my rival in the new position supported me because it actually meant that I had withdrawn from the lane. Because I was one of the good candidates for the next position. I stopped my career on my own, so it was good for them in that sense. (interviewee 11)

4.6. Opting-Out / Why Do I Opted Out of Work?

The main aim of this research is to answer the question as well as open the debate on how and why mothers make the ‘choice’ to quit their careers. Following the pilot study with four respondents, the findings from 16 interviews with mothers who left the workforce permanently or for a certain period of time revealed that such a choice is not a simple individual one; rather it depends on a vast number of reasons. Since every mother’s experience is unique, they marked various reasons behind their decision to leave their jobs or give career breaks. When asked about the reasons for leaving work, the findings revealed three overarching themes of reasons for professional women leaving work after becoming mothers (see table 4).

Table 4. Mothers' Reasons of Leaving Work

The main reasons behind opting-out of work	Frequency
Work-life conflict	13
Intensive Motherhood	9
Workplace mobbing	5

These themes are used as umbrella terms which constitute various reasons within themselves. All of the reasons are related to motherhood and how becoming a mother affects professional women’s careers. For instance, workplace mobbing covers participants’ experience of mobbing both as professional working women and working mothers.

4.6.1. Work-Life Conflict

While there have been several reasons why women opt out of work after becoming mothers, the most apparent reason is work-life conflict. First, they cannot meet the demands and expectations of their roles as professional workers and mothers. When these two roles are combined, these women feel that they cannot perform in both simultaneously, so they have to choose between their jobs and children.

I had always quit my job when my work and family life balance disrupted. If I didn't have children, these overtime workings, traveling, wouldn't be a problem at all in my marriage. These wouldn't be my reason for leaving my job. But with children, I feel like my work-family balance immediately falls apart. It comes to a point that you have to prioritize something and you consider which one is more important; at that point you always choose children. (interviewee 4)

There are indeed structural factors behind this conflict—social institutions reiterating the conflict between paid work and childcare. Several mothers highlighted the lack of affordable quality childcare as a big problem. The provision of childcare services is problematic, especially for the 0-3 year age group, since it is costly and time-consuming to afford professional childcare services. There are no kindergartens, schools or any other childcare services that the state provides, especially for the 0-3 age group. Hence, the mothers underline that the state offers no support in this regard. Such services usually exist in Istanbul but are very limited and expensive, not to mention the quality. In addition, given the living conditions in Istanbul, it can take three to four hours to take the child to a half-hour playgroup and bring them back. When it comes to receiving childcare services at home, they mentioned the high cost of hiring a caregiver; even part-time babysitters with primary school education demand too much money.

Concerning the policy that bids companies to open up kindergartens, the provision of childcare services is under the initiative of companies and institutions. There is not enough regulation and implementation from the side of the state. The problems with regulation and implementation put working parents, especially working mothers, in a vulnerable position to provide care for their children. In fact, it is possible to think that from the point of view of the state, a child is not considered an individual until age 3.

That they are seen as extensions of mothers may imply imprisoning both mothers and children in the private sphere.

In the case of school-age children, according to the participants, the quality of the educational system and social political ideology of the state push parents to enrol their children in private schools, and sending children to public schools is not even a matter of discussion. Also, parents' working hours never align with the school hours; schools expect children to be picked up at 4 p.m. even though working shifts usually end at 5 or 6 p.m. in Turkey. If parents send their child to a public school and they work, there must be someone to look after the child after school. So, even if children go to school, parents try to devise additional arrangements to overcome such conflicts in the system. These arrangements refer to an additional cost if there is no support from grandparents in the form of unpaid labour. This necessarily pushes parents to send their children to private schools because they arrange school hours according to parents' working hours. However, private school prices are very expensive, even for high-income households. Hence, parents need to allocate an enormous amount of money and time to childcare services.

Also, one striking point is that one participant particularly highlighted the duties assigned to mothers by schools. Especially in private schools, when the schools establish parent WhatsApp groups, only mothers are added to these groups. Mothers are assumed to take care of the issues regarding their children. There is a concept of a "class mom" where one mother voluntarily assists the teacher and attends to the student's needs, which shows how schools also perpetuate socially assigned roles to mothers:

I don't think I have duties about my children's schools. I don't think I have to help my child study. When a parent group is established in schools, only mothers are added. Why is there a concept called "class mother"? I already have so many duties at home and at work. One day at a parents' meeting, I said "Does anyone want to be a class father?" and everyone laughed. But then they said why not; and we had a class father for 2 years and he did it very well. So, there are also duties that the school imposes on mothers. Especially in the private schools, they assign projects that don't match child's age and intelligence. This means mothers should do those projects. These messages always come to the mother, why not the father? (interviewee 4)

When children need to be picked up from school during work hours, the duty automatically goes to women. Although getting permission for all employees is hard, it is much harder for fathers since they are not expected to be caregivers. Hence, the traditional organization of work and care services or schools is a structural factor. One of the respondents talked about how systematic constraints reinforce women's opting out of work:

Caregiving is a role assigned to mothers, and the existing system now in Turkey supports this anyway. (interviewee 9)

Among all participants, work-life conflict was prominently the determining factor for the ones who have resigned from work compared to those who have taken unpaid leave. These mothers who have left work permanently mainly were those who used to work in managerial and executive positions and had experienced excessive conflict between work, family, and higher education. Such conflict was because of overtime work, demanding expectations from work, executive duties, lack of professional and social childcare support, and lack of time and effort for graduate courses and studies. One of them was working overtime almost every day when she was a bank employee:

Then I said that if I can't come home and breastfeed my child at 9 p.m., I said I'm leaving the bank and resigned. (interviewee 4)

Apart from family life and childcare responsibilities, being able to reconcile higher education was also a big problem for several mothers. Hence, work-life balance not only refers to the balance between business, family, and academic life. Deriving an example from the graduate student mothers with high attrition rates in the US., Lynch (2008) argued that these mothers' academic life has been greatly interrupted due to the ideals of intensive motherhood and care responsibilities. The findings of this study support this as well:

In fact, motherhood mostly affected my graduate life. It challenged my relationship with academic life. (interviewee 3)

Hence, I observed that women also feel the pressure of the 'having-it-all' myth in which they feel obliged to combine paid work, motherhood and education. Further, this challenge leads to feelings of inadequacy and burnout syndrome, which are

particularly highlighted by 3 of the participants when talking about their reasons for leaving work.

Aside from the lack of professional childcare services, the lack of social support in care work is also a problem for mothers in reconciling work and life. Receiving support from family members for childcare, especially from grandmothers, is a common practice in Turkey. Although some mothers do not prefer getting support from family elders, some argue that they wish to have support which could affect their decision to leave work. For some, participants' own mothers or mothers-in-law were living in different cities or had health problems, so they were not available to provide support on childcare. Some did not volunteer to provide support because they believed everyone has their own life and the care responsibility belongs to parents. Thus, some families had more individualistic values. In one of the cases, the participant stated that she left work because her mother-in-law did not know how to change a diaper:

We can say that my working life came to an end when I became a mother. My mother-in-law came to take care of the baby, I showed how to make diapers but she couldn't do it. I pumped my milk, she couldn't prepare the feeding bottle either. How can I leave that child and go to work? After that, I said, I won't work at least until he turns 2-3 years old. I had to, you know? Sadly. (interviewee 14)

Moreover, participants also mentioned how they had disagreements with their own mothers about parenting styles and child-rearing methods. In that case, they either have to refuse the grandmother's support or make a compromise to get support. Also, this form of support is not professional—their relationship with the people who provide social support is based on personal ties instead of professionalism. This also creates conflicts and hinders mothers' freedom in child-rearing.

I had a lot of fights with my mother at that time. My mother was very helpful, but she also intervened a lot. I was unhappy with that personally. We have such traditional things in the society that grandmothers stake a claim on grandchildren so much. There, I think the mother comes out of the picture completely. (interviewee 9)

In addition, another crucial point is that the social support from family elders actually refers to their unpaid labour. When mothers engage in paid work, grandmothers become those who perform unpaid domestic labour. This is also a crucial issue for gender inequality in unpaid care work, which should be the objective of further studies.

4.6.2. Intensive Motherhood

Among the mothers interviewed, 9 of them notably stated that they wanted to take care of their children by themselves by their choice. They highlighted the positive impact of mothers taking over the care responsibility both on the well-being of children and on their well-being as well. They asserted several times that they would not have it any other way since the time they had with their children was so precious. Also, they stated the importance of secure attachment between mothers and children. While the theme is apparent, there are various reasons behind this desire.

First of all, the change in one's priorities once one becomes a mother was a point made by several mothers. Although they have dedicated tremendous time and effort to their career physically, psychologically and intellectually, having a child, especially in the first years, has altered their work commitment and priorities. The study results align with other existing studies on work commitment and priority change after motherhood. According to Evertsson (2012), mothers, especially with children in pre-school years, experience a slight decrease in work commitment and change in priorities in the transition to motherhood. In fact, women's making unpaid domestic work the priority, especially after becoming mothers for the first time, substantially shows individual preferences shaped by gender stereotypes and social norms (Bertrand, 2020; Ciminelli et al., 2021). Most participants argued that after children turn three years old, they need to socialize with their peers. At least in the first few years after birth, they had to put their children and care work first. Hence, leaving work seemed the best option given the circumstances. For one mother, taking unpaid leave came across as an alternative to resignation:

Because I didn't know there was such an alternative, like taking unpaid leave. At that moment, I was not in a position to separate very much; the child was 7 months old and very attached to me. As I said, it didn't make much sense to me to leave with anxiety and make both myself and my baby anxious. After a year, I could find a job and work. I thought it wouldn't be a problem. Of course, it is easier to do this at the age of 31-32. For example, resignation would be a much more difficult process for me now. Because when I return, I will be close to 40 years old, and of course, there will be bias in the sector. But at that time, I did not know that there was such an alternative. When I heard about the unpaid leave alternative, it made more sense to consider it. (interviewee 7)

Furthermore, for the groups of mothers with children under the age of 3, almost all mothers stated that they were uncomfortable with leaving their children with anyone when they were so little. They all highlighted the importance of secure attachment. Primarily they argued that children need their mothers at first, especially between the ages of 0-3 and after the age of 3, they develop social needs. Hence, they were uncomfortable leaving children to ‘strangers’ such as babysitters. Also, apart from the mothers with an equal division of labour in caregiving in the household, mothers generally do not trust anyone with childcare, even fathers. When asked their opinions on fathers’ leaving work and becoming primary caregivers, they questioned fathers’ capability.

I think no one would prefer this. If it happens, I think it is completely out of necessity. Maybe the mother works in the public sector, the father works in the private sector and he had already left work, then he can take care of the child. I do not think fathers willingly do this. If there is an obligation and the father is successful, why not? (interviewee 15)

(laughs) I laugh like that. Is there such a thing in Turkey? Maybe in other countries. I don’t know; I guess I wouldn’t trust him. They could if they wanted to, but after once or twice, they would say it’s enough. The father does not have the patience of the mother. Men were not born with such equipment. They can’t even take care of themselves, so how can they take care of children? (interviewee 14)

They were personally convinced that fathers are not capable of providing primary care for children; instead, fathers fulfil children’s need to play as playmates. On the one hand, one group of mothers attributed the reasons behind fathers’ incapability of care to socialization and lack of knowledge. On the other hand, another group of mothers emphasized the biological differences between mothers and fathers on behalf of a ‘maternal instinct’:

Caregiving is about predisposition. A father might not understand what the child feels, wants. But a mother can. I don’t think fathers can look after a baby. (interviewee 16)

One of the answers to the question of fathers’ leaving work and taking care of children instead of mothers revealed gender stereotyping as well as toxic masculinity in society:

You know there are many examples in other countries, but I think we don’t have that mentality. The father will be seen as “henpecked,” there is social

pressure. My husband says he would do it but I think we are not ready for this as a society. (interviewee 8)

Some also put so much emphasis on the physical connection between mothers and children, especially during the breastfeeding period. A few of them defined breastfeeding as a ‘right’ for children. For these mothers, breastfeeding is a big part of care, and they feel obliged to take over the responsibility of care because the child is attached to the mother, especially in the first two years. Thus, the emphasis on the biological dimension of motherhood was more prevalent for these mothers. The mothers who highly emphasize the biological connection between mothers and children tend to believe in a maternal instinct and justified predisposition as a part of motherhood.

Some of these mothers, however, emphasized the social and intellectual needs of their children as a reason why they wanted to claim the responsibility of care. They were critical towards the quality of care provided by babysitters, comparing their own educational levels with theirs.

I work with children, I have education on psychology. Given my educational background, leaving my baby with a babysitter didn't sit well with me. (interviewee 1)

Thus, having a professional job and higher educational level may in fact result in leaving work for some of the mothers. To exemplify:

My decision started with not being able to meet my child's educational and social needs. Others could meet her physical needs easily, but I was aware that a caregiver or family elders couldn't meet her social needs. I wanted to raise a well-equipped child who grew up with good values. And I realized that I couldn't do it in all that time I was dedicating it to. That's why I decided to leave. (interviewee 11)

One of the aims of this study was to provide a critique of choice. In this respect, the findings show that opting out is a gendered practice. The existing social structure based on traditional gender roles hinders women's employment and confines them to the bulk of domestic responsibilities, if not physically, mentally. Women have more authority over issues regarding the private sphere, and men are more than willing to hand over control. Hence, women are those who suffer from work-life conflict, and they are expected to overcome the problems arising from this conflict. It is not

precisely that men discourage women's employment and expect them to leave their jobs to provide domestic and care work; in fact, mothers are encouraged to return to work by their partners. The mothers interviewed stated that when it comes to the decision to leave work, the decision was theirs and their husbands respected it. However, it is problematic when choosing to leave work is considered a woman's own decision. Instead of reaching a family decision, a husband's role is reduced to supporting and respecting the decision to leave. In that sense, opting out becomes a gendered experience. It would be misleading to emphasize the concept of choice without taking into account how the structural and cultural systems reinforce this choice. To illustrate:

As a matter of fact, his leaving his career would've made much more sense than me leaving. I loved working more than him and my career was better than his. But gender roles existed there. Actually, he would've leave too, he doesn't have any masculine taboos. But it's not possible for my husband to organize the house without my guidance. I would still be in the organization of the household, still taking care of the child. That's why I left because I thought I could manage better. Also, I thought I could continue my working life in the future. We didn't even discuss whether it was going to be him or me. (interviewee 11)

The motherhood ideology, especially in the form of intensive mothering, as substantially diffused in society, is operating powerfully in the lives of these mothers. As in society, "motherhood represents the greatest achievement of a woman's life: the sole true means of self-realization" (Oakley, 1975, p. 186); embracing intensive mothering becomes a way of identity construction for these mothers. In this way, they would be free from the struggles of working intensely and mothering intensely simultaneously. That might be why one mother argued back in the day that "Maternity provides an escape hatch that paternity does not. Having a baby provides a graceful and convenient exit" (Belkin, 2003, para. 5).

4.6.3. Workplace Mobbing

Several participants had experienced workplace mobbing before and after becoming mothers. It is possible that these women were subjected to mobbing for being a minority as women in decision-making jobs. Previous research has found that it is more likely for women in higher managerial positions than men to be subjected to mobbing in the workplace (Hoel et al., 2001; Rosander et al., 2020).

Especially five mothers interviewed stated that their primary reason for leaving work was mobbing at the workplace. One of the mothers who worked as a reporter suffered from mobbing before having children, but after becoming pregnant and having children, the mobbing behaviour increased, leading her to quit work:

When I got pregnant, it was not because I was pregnant but I had an argument with my supervisor and was subjected to heavy mobbing. I was taken on mandatory unpaid leave many times, I was sent to work abroad while I was pregnant, I had to broadcast actively for hours at minus degrees. Also, someone who was just starting out with 1-2 years of experience but wanted to rise said “she didn’t come to work saying she was pregnant.” (interviewee 10)

Another participant was experiencing health problems due to working overtime during pregnancy:

Pregnant women cannot work more than 7 hours legally. But when I was pregnant, I worked 12 hours every day until 7 months. So I started to get sick and one day I passed out on the way home. (interviewee 4)

It is not rare for mothers to become the targets of workplace mobbing—which is related to the motherhood penalty. This participant worked in a French company that was very sensitive to protecting labour rights and encouraging work-life balance for working mothers. When a Turkish company bought the company, the participant was exposed to heavy mobbing and experienced increased work-life conflict:

Because you can’t go when they say come, you can’t move when they say move to Istanbul. This means a reassignment, so they cannot legally dictate such a thing. But what happened? I was exposed to mobbing because I did not comply with their wishes. You asked if you did not leave, would you promote to the next level, I would never move up in the company that bought it because that is how they looked at a female employee with a child anyway. It could have been worse; they could have even taken my title. Who your manager is, who owns the company, and their point of view is very critical. (interviewee 4)

However, the mothers who quit work due to mobbing saw it as an opportunity to raise children, deciding to provide care for their children for at least a specific period.

4.7. COVID-19

Since this study takes place in the post-Covid-19 period, the effects of the pandemic on the lives of women and their families have been one of the dimensions of this

research. In this section, COVID-19 referred to being a working mother during the pandemic circumstances, especially under lockdown. 5 out of 16 participants showed their main reason for leaving work as amplified work-life conflict due to COVID-19. Three of them were pregnant by the time of the outbreak of the pandemic, and they suffered from the lack of safety measures to prevent COVID-19 in the workplace. Some defined COVID-19 as one of the reasons leading to their decision to quit work because of the struggles they faced based on the combination of remote paid work and care work. In Turkey, as elsewhere, women's domestic burden has been amplified compared to men—deepening the pre-existing gender inequalities within the household during the COVID-19 period (Kalaylıoğlu et al., 2020). Also, while the gender gap in unpaid domestic and care work widened during the lockdown, differences in unpaid domestic work among women in terms of employment status and educational level were reduced, indicating that economic power ceased to be a factor during the pandemic (İlkkaracan & Memiş, 2021). Hence, this aligns with the findings of this study, as almost half of the professional mothers interviewed stated an increase in their domestic responsibilities in this period. Moreover, more women have taken leave from work than men, and more women have changed their workplaces and started working from home compared to men during the COVID-19 pandemic in Turkey (Kalaylıoğlu et al., 2020). In addition, with the impact of COVID-19 in the US., the percentage of women with children under ten years leaving the workforce is 23% compared to men by 13%; and women are downshifting careers by 17 per cent whereas it is 13% for men (Zandt, 2022). These findings apply to these mothers as well. Being the primary caregiver and working from home at the same time was a significant problem for several mothers interviewed. To illustrate:

Working from home next to my daughter was so difficult for me. I couldn't get any support as well and I quit my job. Both my daughter, work and home balance began to tire me a lot, despite the support of my husband. (interviewee 8)

There is a 3-year-old boy who wants your care, your love and attention, and you stare at the computer in front of him from morning to night. He says he's hungry, you say you have a meeting. He says, "You will be at home, but we won't ask you anything as if you're at work?", "You are at home, but you will always look at the computer?" And you think what am I doing, which one is more important, what is the meaning of this life. It's

really traumatic for women working at home with children. (interviewee 4)

They also argued that by working from home, the concept of working hours disappears, and employers and institutions expect workers to be available nearly 24/7. Hence, after the COVID-19 period, the existing work-life conflict deepened, and the existing gendered division of labour has been exacerbated, resulting in mothers' questioning their priorities over work and children. Working from home and providing care for children at the same time became almost impossible after a certain point, and some of these mothers find themselves at the crossroads of choosing between their careers and their children.

4.8. What Happened After I Opted-Out?

As a part of the research objectives, mothers were asked how leaving work affected them in every possible way. According to their answers, there have been financial, social, psychological and intellectual consequences of leaving work. When these mothers leave work, they take on the primary caregiver role. They stated that their daily life has started to consist of primary child care and also domestic work in some cases. Half of the mothers had additional support from their family members, mainly from their own mothers or mothers-in-law. Apart from that, they were the primary caregivers since they stayed home while their husbands continued to work. Six of the mothers stated that their domestic responsibilities increased after leaving work, which reinforced the gendered division of labour. Almost all of them admitted that they missed working, especially the social life that comes from paid work. They said that even getting ready and leaving home is valuable in one's life; taking part in the public sphere makes so much difference.

I have always been a person who worked very hard, and suddenly I fell into a big void. I love to work, I love to be productive. Staying at home was psychologically exhausting. You've studied for so many years, you've had a master's degree, your career has reached a certain point, so it was sad to be at home. So I didn't quit my job by saying that my working life was over, I've always wanted to return. (interviewee 15)

When you get into the motherhood vortex, you can't get out of it any way. Frankly, I miss my individualism more. I missed me. (interviewee 3)

The importance of economic independence for a woman was a point made by all of the mothers without exception. Earning their own money gives them a sense of power, freedom and empowerment, and it means not being dependent on their husbands.

Having your own economic freedom, earning your own money is different. I have never had a problem with my husband about this, but I realized I can't spend as much money as I used to psychologically. I really like to work, I like to earn money, it gives me self-confidence. (interviewee 5)

Of course it would be better if I had my salary. I'm taking care of my baby, it's okay, but it has come with a cost. (interviewee 1)

One mother stated that the main challenge after leaving work is taking money from her partner:

I work 24/7 at home and I have no income in return. From the moment I graduated from university, I have earned my own money. I still don't take any money from my husband's hand, it's been 10 years. It is a great freedom to have one's own income. (interviewee 2)

After leaving their jobs, the participants started to spend their days at home according to the needs of their children. Almost all of them complained about how their lives become routinized, especially after busy working schedules. Hence, spending so much time at home and only taking care of children made them feel unqualified or incompetent, in their own words. Going to work every morning was much more associated with the sense of purpose by these mothers, whereas waking up every morning to take care of their children was linked to a sense of responsibility.

Even if you take care of your child, you feel so incomplete and useless, for someone who is used to working life. (interviewee 14)

There is no purpose, life always flows the same, everything goes in the same routine. Having economic freedom and producing something were the things that I missed, I yearned for. (interviewee 16)

The findings showed that there is a nostalgia for working life; almost all participants think of returning to work. Even the participants with permanent leave of ten years stated that they still desired to work. In a sense, mothers cannot accept the fact that they become stay-at-home mothers:

I think a lot of it these days, I think I miss working life a lot. I feel the lack for it. Since my mother was a working woman, I guess they never motivated

me that way, I still think that I am not a woman to sit at home and cook and clean. (interviewee 2)

Except for a few participants who felt burned out due to being torn between working overtime and care work and who have exposed to mobbing, most mothers expressed how much they missed working—to be productive in a social working environment.

Almost all mothers stated they could not allocate time to themselves once they became mothers and left work. For example, there is time for coffee breaks while working, yet, being at home and performing care work is not something organized with certain working hours and breaks. Hence, they repeatedly said, ‘they never sit down at home.’ They can no longer do things they love due to the limited time they have now. Hence, this may come across as one’s alienation from their labour and themselves because mothers are expected to devote themselves to children in the patriarchal system. One mother particularly emphasized the instant shift of interest from the pregnant person to the child after birth and how it negatively affects mothers’ psychological well-being.

Last but not least, all mothers were aware that their careers would be negatively affected once they give career breaks. Some of them stated that they had accepted the fact that they would fall behind. When asked whether there would be any difference in their career if they had not left work, most agreed that there would be a difference:

Yes it would. The period when I ascended hierarchically was the period when I didn’t have children. I had got a promotion and fell behind in my first unpaid leave, and I will probably fall behind in this one as well. I will be postponing two promotions for four years because I left for two years. In fact, I think that I have fallen behind at least for 5 years. (interviewee 7)

Also, taking a career break for a long time is one of the biggest obstacles for women in finding a job again. However, I observed that the mothers interviewed were mainly confident in themselves as professionals who have led successful careers, and most were planning on returning to work in the future.

4.9. Professional Mothers Opting-Out of Work

Since the target group of this study on white-collar, professional women employees mainly with an intense pace of work and managerial duties, it is important to highlight their unique experiences on opting out specifically.

It is no doubt that the worker identities of these mothers are at the centre of their lives. Before motherhood, they devoted most of their time and energy to their work; all were highlighting at any chance how much they loved to work, especially if they got the reward for their efforts financially and intellectually. After becoming mothers, they have experienced a priority change—mainly because they become the primary caregivers, and they started to struggle with ‘mom guilt’ for not being able to devote their time fully. The reasons behind such guilt in this case of mothers are mainly work-life conflict and maternal gatekeeping. When they work so many hours with a busy schedule, they start to ‘search for their conscience.’ Especially for mothers who used to work as mid-level managers and senior executives, the feeling of guilt was apparent since they nearly had no time to allocate to their children, especially their social needs.

When you go to work, you feel remorse, I am not the one taking care of my child, the babysitter is, and my child grows up without me. (interviewee 8)

Such a feeling of guilt and the behaviours that refer to maternal gatekeeping are more evident in the first years when children are under the age of 3. The majority of mothers do not trust others—family elders, fathers, and babysitters in terms of care work. Until then, these mothers feel that they would perform care work the best, which might be relevant to their worker identities as they used to work in decision-making positions. After children become school-age and they develop the need for socializing with their peers, mothers start to withdraw from the picture. After that point, their longing for work becomes more prominent. This might mean that they project their identities as professional workers to their identities as mothers, at least for a certain period. In a sense, these mothers cannot accept that they become stay-at-home mothers because working was a big part of their lives. Thus, mothers’ own choices to opt out of work, in fact, come across as results of a social force—by means of which they feel ‘it is the right thing to do.’ Even if almost all participants reject the traditional roles of a mother and advocate women’s working more than advocating women’s becoming mothers, most regard opting out of work for the benefit of children as the right decision. In research from Wallis (2004), narrating the experience of opted-out professional mothers:

Nevins is “truly passionate” about her job, but after seven years, she’s about to leave it. When the baby arrives, she will take off at least a year, maybe two, maybe five. “It’s hard. I’m giving up a great job that pays well,

and I have a lot of respect and authority,” she says. The decision to stay home was a tough one, but most of her working-mom friends have made the same choice. She concludes, “I know it’s the right thing.” (p. 1)

Hence, the concept of choice becomes critical once again. These mothers believe that both becoming a mother and leaving work are based on personal choices. Yet, the idea that mothers must devote themselves to children because children need their mothers makes the choice of leaving work is the right one. Both the state policies based on familialism and social norms in the society propagate this idea, thus; reinforcing traditional gender roles within and beyond the family. Hence, making a choice between work and family, thus; leaving work, comes across as a gendered pattern. Even for women who are well-educated, working in well-paid jobs in decision-making positions, and mostly living in metropolitan cities, it is not easy to be freed from gender relations.

Moreover, the majority of mothers do not think that their working life is over; they expect to return to work in the future. While there is bias against women returning to work after a career break, several mothers are confident in being able to find new jobs. They have confidence in their professional skills and careers. Besides the confidence they have, financial reasons and children’s needs mainly affected mothers’ returning to work or thinking about returning to work. As one mother who especially suffered from intensive work-life conflict and mobbing stated:

In fact, the main reason is financial because I have to provide a future for my children. They have some talents and some interests; I don’t want them to be lacking in school education and their interests. I also work to maintain the living standards that I dream of for them. That’s the only reason I’m going to be back. Otherwise, I don’t like it anymore; I don’t do it with love. (interviewee 4)

In fact, they tried to engage in different forms of work since they wanted to avoid becoming estranged from working life. Working freelance is one of these forms, which will be analysed in the next section.

4.10. Flexible Working and Part-Time Work

At the time of the interviews, 3 out of 16 participants were working freelance. 2 out of 16 participants had switched to part-time working for a certain period of time before leaving the workforce.

As for flexible working, working freelance is regarded as temporary and subsidiary to full-time paid work by the participants themselves. They emphasized how much they loved working, so remaining separate from their primary jobs for a long time was not an option; they wanted to continue working in one form or another. The main problem in flexible working is that when it is regarded as subsidiary, especially by the partners, this may possibly reinforce gender inequalities and gendered division of labour within the household. Moreover, one participant highlighted the challenge of flexible or remote working due to the blurred lines between work and home. When working freelance from home, they had to perform duties they would not normally do if they went to the office to work. Also, it is not clear in the minds of other family members if they are working or they are taking care of the child:

I have to remind my husband from time to time. I was working hard for a while, and once he said "But I'm working." I had to remind him that I was working too. He thought that I wasn't working at that time. Okay, maybe I didn't work in shifts but I was writing reports. It's like you are working but you don't. It was difficult to remind him that. (interviewee 11)

As for the part-time work, there was an opportunity to compare the experiences of a professional worker and a professional manager in terms of part-time work. That mother, who worked as a professional worker without any managerial duties, worked part-time during pregnancy. Because the institution in which she was working was protecting the rights of the employees, part-time working was implemented fairly without any overtime work or exploitation. Thus, the participant argued that part-time work was a beneficial strategy in that case in transition to motherhood.

On switching to flexible working arrangements, mothers who work in professional and managerial jobs are considered to be well-resourced mothers to make choices in terms of paid work arrangements. Yet, women's lived experiences can prove otherwise. Part-time work was controversial for the other participants, who were working as mid-level managers and project managers. In that case, they had a very comprehensive health

benefit, but they had to pay a part of their employee liability as the institution could not make the health benefit available to a part-time employee. In other words, they had to give up about half their salary for 3 hours of leave a day. Since the institution did not think it would be done at the managerial level with the workload, they assumed that nobody would use it, but the participant wanted to try part-time work.

There was a team that I worked with, they continued to work for 3 hours that I didn't work. Therefore, I had to follow up and manage the part they worked, at nights. Because they had meetings the next day, you have to control their preparations or you need to organize which can attend the meeting and which cannot. In other words, the 3 hours that I didn't work turned back to me as 4-5 hours that I had to work at home. I was struggling and I started to get the signal that these two won't work out together. (interviewee 11)

By questioning flexible and part-time working as a fallacy, Stoller (2022) argued that it is hard to define boundaries around where paid employment ends and where life beings during the day in flexible working—besides, flexible working has not resolved problems about care work or altered the gendered division of labour, as it has expected to do so.

Also, career choices, flexible or part-time work, may be based on prevailing social norms and state policies. “Part-time work, for instance, may partly reflect women’s individual preferences but may also be influenced by a social norm that women shoulder a greater share of childcare responsibilities” (Ciminelli et al., 2021, p. 7). This again proves that women’s career choices are not simply individual but highly dependent on the existing gender relations and gender inequalities.

4.11. Perceptions on Motherhood and Motherhood Discourse

In order to understand the possible relationship between opting out of work and motherhood ideology, it was crucial to learn about mothers’ perceptions of motherhood and motherhood discourse.

When the participants were asked whether motherhood is a necessity for a woman, 15 out of 16 participants disagreed that becoming a mother is a requirement for women or that all women should become mothers. Mostly, they have never considered it a

necessity before and after becoming a mother. They emphasized motherhood as a choice:

We didn't have children at the age of 20, leaving our parents' house to husband's house where the only role is to have children. Our generation is far from this social structure. Somehow we discovered our individual freedom, our personal space when we went to university. But marriage and having children affected me the most, not my PhD or master's degree or living in China. Because they try to fit you into traditional roles and I never liked it. (interviewee 9)

In fact, after becoming a mother, they realized more that only people who wish to be a mother should become mothers. Because when people become mothers, they are suddenly exposed to the social norms and scripts attached to motherhood, which aim to confine them to specific roles. Since there are difficulties that come with motherhood and many things that go away from one's self, they argued that it is necessary to be ready and willing to withstand it. Only one participant argued that every woman should experience this feeling of motherhood:

A living thing that grows inside you, and giving birth, it's a miracle. It's a feeling that cannot be described and I think every woman should experience it. (interviewee 2)

Moreover, when it comes to the idea that mothers had specific duties, most agreed that there are things that mothers must and should do, and they mainly emphasized emotional and social needs and the protection of children. However, they mainly argued that not only mothers but parents, in general, are responsible for these duties. When asked about the differences between mothers' and fathers' duties, the majority of them said that "There should not be any difference, but there are, given the existing structure of the society." Half of them include primary care to mothers' duties, whereas the other half do not. One of the participants criticized that a mother's duty is not to breastfeed the child, arguing that this is a social pressure that derives from biological reductionism:

I don't think there are duties only of mothers. For example, I don't think the duty of a mother is to breastfeed. Once my doctor said to me I was breastfeeding with maternal feelings. I said no, I was breastfeeding because of social pressure. No one has to breastfeed. That and giving birth are classified as differences, apart from that a father can do the same

things. Frankly, as someone who has felt under a lot of pressure, I don't like the roles assigned to mothers. (interviewee 9)

Another participant was also disagreeing that there are things that mothers are responsible of as:

I don't think there is. I don't like the roles that society assigns to mothers, which is why we have a lot of conflict with my husband's family. When my husband takes the child to the toilet, they get surprise that I don't. We are both sitting and one of us can go, why does it have to be the mother? (interviewee 7)

Furthermore, the perceptions over a distinction between a good mother and a bad mother seemed controversial. While the findings show that the participants do not necessarily embrace demanding good mother ideals based on intensive mothering, some were very cautious in defining mothers as bad. Mostly they defined bad mothers in regard to violence and abuse against children. They were also uncomfortable with the labels of good or bad mothers. Some highlighted that there are mothers with a lack of resources—mothers who want the best for their children but are unable to do so. Nevertheless, in some cases, the arguments led to an essentialist point. While they said there are no inherently bad mothers, they did not say there are no inherently good mothers.

A mother who is not loved and exposed to violence may have learned motherhood in that way. Or she got pregnant unintentionally and left her child because she couldn't establish a bond. It is also very important to want to have children. Being a mother unintentionally is a very difficult thing. So I think there is no bad mother, I can't say bad. It is a very controversial subject. But actually, I don't think there is a bad mother in essence. (interviewee 13)

When participants were asked about the meaning of motherhood for them, the most apparent concepts were unconditional love, sacrifice, responsibility and nurture, followed by patience and to protect. Half of the participants agreed that motherhood comes with unconditional love, whereas others criticized this idea and argued that there is no such thing as unconditional love because motherhood shakes mothers' lives entirely. Five mothers emphasized sacrifice as the definition of motherhood because "you give so much of yourself when you become a mother." Responsibility was also emphasized in the same direction as sacrifice and nurture because several of the mothers interviewed regarded motherhood as "raising a person." These concepts,

revealed from the findings, comprise mothers' major perception of motherhood. These are critical in that they show how and to what extent motherhood ideologies are relevant to mothers' own perceptions. As stated before, motherhood ideology in Turkey can be characterized by sacred motherhood—where sacrifice and patience are promoted as virtues of a mother. This type of motherhood ideology is also in line with intensive mothering ideology since both are based on the expectation of total devotion from mothers to motherhood. In this care, total devotion or sacrifice finds itself in leaving work to devote as much of their time and energy as possible.

When it comes to *fitrat*—the debate over the predisposition of motherhood, almost all mothers disagreed that motherhood is based on predisposition or it is natural. Nevertheless, while half of them criticized this discourse thoroughly, half of them still emphasized the biological dimension of motherhood. As for one of the mothers who believed there is no such thing as motherhood predisposition or maternal instinct as well as 'all mothers are good':

These are very functional, useful words. They are extremely beneficial to men. How else will they suppress women? (interviewee 10)

Nevertheless, some believe that there are differences between mothers and fathers, and this is due to biological differences. In that sense, the overemphasis on the biological dimension of motherhood results in biological reductionism—signalling that mothers would always be the primary caregivers and fathers would always be the secondary caregivers even if they try not to.

Moreover, the participants were asked what they think of the phrase “a woman's place is in the home,” which is a prevalent discourse both on the societal and political level in Turkey, especially since the rule of the AKP regime. Almost none of the mothers agreed with this statement and were very critical of it, knowing that such an idea is being propagated to reinforce women's secondary status in society. Most of them answered in the same way—“a woman's place is wherever she wants.”

It's not just about working. A housewife's having a political stance on a social issue is also about having a role outside. I think that the role of a woman cannot be confined to the house, regardless of many things, whether she is a housewife or not, or religious preferences. (interviewee 7)

In that sense, most of the participants were critical of the public/private sphere dichotomy. Only 1 out of 16 participants believed in gender segregation at work, arguing that women have a place in the public sphere but ‘they should work in jobs according to their nature’:

For example, I see female pumpers at the gas station, or a female truck driver. A woman should work, of course, but she should work in jobs according to her nature. Instead of working in places which a lot of vagabonds get gas, she should work in safer places. Maybe this is because of the conditions in our country. A woman works at a gas station at night, do we know what might happen to her? Let men do those jobs, and we do things suitable for ourselves. (interviewee 16)

As for the ‘at least three children’ policy, all mothers disagreed with the idea. They argued that nobody has the right to tell women how many children they should have. Also, only four out of 16 participants had two children, and they did not think of having more children. Except for a few mothers who highlighted the contribution of siblings to each other’s social development, the majority of the mothers were not thinking of having another child because it is already demanding to have one, especially given the current economic status of Turkey.

Almost all my friends say that one child is more than enough, even with one child my life has come to this point, our marriage has come to this point, so no thanks. I think the same. I wish I’d knew that they were having problems as well so I wouldn’t be depressed. (interviewee 9)

They were already criticizing that women are told to have children while cannot get any support when it comes to raising those children, which was one of the critiques in this study towards motherhood ideology in Turkey and how it legitimized women’s confinement to motherhood through familialism. While having children has been promoted in Turkey for a long period, mainly through pronatalist discourse, it is conflicting that the existing system does not support having children at the policy level. It can be said that mothers, assigned as the primary caregivers, are left to their fates. One of the participants highlighted the conflict in state policies as:

The fact that the Ministry of Health says only breast milk in the first two years and that the maternity leave already ends in those first two years seems like a contradiction within the scope of the same state. If they say breast milk for two years, they need to develop a different policy. (interviewee 1)

4.12. The Relationship Between Opting-Out and Motherhood Ideology

It can be said that there is a relationship between mothers' opting out of work and motherhood ideology on both personal and social levels. Socially, the gender ideology that ascribes women as mothers and mothers as primary caregivers is internalized by society and constitutes the basis of existing social policies regarding maternity, family, and women's employment. Yet, this is not in the direction towards gender equality; instead, the existing policies, as well as the attitudes of employers towards pregnant people and mothers, are discriminatory. While all have unique experiences, most mothers go through the same phase starting from pregnancy—they have to prove they will be able to continue to work, struggle between being the primary caregiver and a professional worker, to lose commitment to work because of the motherhood penalty or to experience a shift in their priorities, and to leave work either temporarily or permanently. Hence, as I argued before, opting out is a gendered process; concerning mothers rather than fathers. That mothers are the ones leaving work to take care of the children reinforces the motherhood ideology in which women are assigned and even rewarded as primary caregivers.

The findings show that mothers' practices regarding childcare and being working mothers were in line with motherhood ideology even though sometimes their perceptions and opinions contradict. First, although they believe that mothers and fathers should equally participate in care work, they argue that a 'mother's intuition' differs from a father's. Hence, we can talk about the existence of a certain level of maternal gatekeeping in the case of these mothers, in which mothers assert "control over parenting decisions and over information concerning their children" (Hauser, 2012, p. 54). Thus, mothers have an influence "in inhibiting their partners' involvement" (Allen & Hawkins, 1999, p. 209). The determining role of maternal gatekeeping on fathers' involvement in care work is demonstrated by the experience of one of the mothers who stated they had an equal division of labour in childcare:

I never interfered with my husband about childcare, like why did you feed him this, why did you dress him that. In my opinion, this gives him self-confidence and he is more involved in care process. So, I think whether mothers are controlling affects whether fathers are involved in care work or not. (interviewee 3)

However, Hauser (2012) also argues that gatekeeping is a complex gender issue—fathers also contribute to maternal gatekeeping by engaging in less demanding and more rewarding parenting duties and also by giving control to mothers. This argument suits well with the results of this research in many ways. The fathers in this research mainly take over the playmate role and are willing to concede other important tasks to mothers since these mothers are also professionals who are very capable of everything.

We didn't make any detailed plans on childcare because I've always been very determined and organized. My husband also trusts me in every way. So I somehow found my way. (interviewee 11)

Furthermore, mothers mostly felt the urge to be with their children instead of leaving them for work and believed their children needed them. The majority of participants think that the best way to perform childcare is for mothers being mainly responsible, at least in the first two years. Only 3 participants believe that the best way is for both parents to be equally responsible for the childcare. Thus, these three cases were exceptional examples from the findings, as most participants believe that the involvement of mothers, instead of fathers, in caregiving is highly critical for children's development and psychological well-being. While this is understandable, it also raises the question of whether such beliefs are connected to motherhood ideology. Suppose we consider Ann Oakley's definition of motherhood ideology—that “all mothers need their children and all children need their mothers” (1975, p. 186). In that case, mothers may leave work because they believe their children need specifically their mothers. The sense of guilt might result in such belief and maternal gatekeeping for mothers. Research from Epp and Velagaleti (2004) revealed that mothers' control over care work, which can be assessed as maternal gatekeeping, actually derives from a “working mom guilt” (p. 920). Hence, it can be said that that the mothers feel that their children specifically need them as primary caregivers indicate the motherhood ideology operates in the lives of these women—especially predicating motherhood ideology on the definition by Oakley.

Above all, the most prominent finding is that motherhood is an identity construction for these mothers who, priorly, were women who suffered from gender inequality in the workplace as professionals. These women worked very hard with a busy schedule, trying to shatter the glass ceiling to overcome workplace mobbing, bias against women

and mothers in the labour market and the motherhood penalty. Hence, they either raise a child without social support at this pace and suffer from a double burden by themselves, or they embrace intensive motherhood and construct their identities through being good mothers. In the case of these professional women, opting out of work or leaving work for a particular time to become full-time mothers comes across as a strategy—which can be conceptualised as *strategic motherhood*. Such a strategy can be regarded as professional mothers’ “bargaining with patriarchy” which refers to the strategies developed by women to gain relative power and autonomy within the boundaries of patriarchal oppression (Kandiyoti, 1988). There was a change in their priorities over work and motherhood, which is followed by the internalisation of intensive mothering and then leaving work. Even though these are women from high-ranking jobs and decision-making positions, motherhood, which is rewarded by the society, especially in Turkey, gives them relatively strategic autonomy considering the challenges and struggles they face as professional women. Hence, this suggests a relation to the motherhood ideology in society because such an ideology that assigns motherhood as the sole identity for women also socially rewards mothers who embrace intensive mothering.

4.13. Differences Among Participants

While providing an overall picture of the experience of professional women leaving work after becoming mothers, this study also presents the differentiation between mothers in terms of the type of leave, occupational roles, number of children, age of children, cities of residency and more under the phenomenon of opting-out.

First, it is critical to distinguish between opting out permanently and giving a career break, as in unpaid leave. The main difference is whether mothers work in the private or public sector. The mothers who took unpaid leave were working in the public sector. Taking unpaid leave is likely discouraged in the private sector.

You may have opportunities, but the institution you work for may not support unpaid leave; I think we are left alone on this issue as women. For example, I can take unpaid leave right now because our company works semi-private, but there is no such thing in the private sector. Some mothers don't want to leave their baby and leave, especially in the 3-4 months period, during that attachment bond process. Nor does anyone have the right to leave a mark on the mother and the baby. The paid leave period

may be extended a little bit, or at least they support unpaid leave a little more. It's like, the child of a public sector worker is a child; what is ours? (laughing). If you get unpaid leave in the state, you can optionally extend it until the child is over two years old. Why can't someone working in the private sector take advantage of it? (interviewee 7)

In the case of mothers who are on unpaid leave, the two primary reasons are intensive motherhood and workplace mobbing, together with burnout. Three mothers regarded giving a career break and taking over childcare as an escape from the mobbing and burnout they were exposed to at work. Again, giving a career break for a certain period becomes a strategy for professional women towards struggles at work through motherhood. Two mothers emphasised the special connection between mothers and children, especially in the first two to three years. They were embracing intensive mothering, but at the same time, they argued that children's primary space and needs transform after three years of age. After children develop social needs, they think their role as mothers transforms as well. This may be connected to the lack of childcare services for children under three years of age because this was never an option for the mothers. Where the existing social policies and prevailing social norms assign care work to women, it is more than convenient to embrace this role as mothers. Also, it should be noted that the extent to which mothers internalise and embrace intensive motherhood varies.

The participants who left work permanently argued that there should not be a gendered division of labour within the household and that duties belong to mothers, but there are. They feel that specific duties are automatically assigned to women and mothers. In that case, a sense of surrender arises—they come to a position of accepting the existing situation. Especially the participants who left work 10 years ago tend to regard motherhood as an extension of their working life:

I am a person who loves working, I've never sat around at home, even now since the children have grown up. Every day I try to find an activity, thinking how I can contribute to the children. I think everyone has to do something in life. I've never been a person who sits around. If I had worked, I would have continued the same. (interviewee 2)

These mothers tend to attach more meaning to becoming full-time mothers like it is a project. They also miss working life like every other participant, but they miss working the most when their children do not need them as they grow up and start to participate

more in public life. Also, it is harder to return to the labour market as time passes. As stated before, returning to work after a career break is subjected to bias in the labour market. That such bias is more vital for men than women (Weisshaar, 2018) justifies the socially constructed gender roles and that mothers are assigned as primary caregivers. Thus, women's identity construction through motherhood may be more apparent after growing away from the labour market.

In the case of mid-level managers and senior executives, work-life conflict is more prominent in their lives. Since they are also responsible for others in the workplace and hold decision-making positions, they cannot hand over their work responsibilities. Also, the feeling of guilt is apparent because motherhood is associated with the concept of 'time' for these mothers—to allocate time to children is almost a prerequisite for being a good mother.

After leaving work, the feelings of inadequacy and purposelessness are the same for almost all participants regardless of their type of leave. The more the participants are used to working in a fast-paced work environment, the more they struggle adapting to being stay-at-home mothers.

The general tendency among participants with small children, especially in the breastfeeding period, was to emphasize the biological dimension of motherhood. They argued that children become mothers' extensions in the first years. Hence, breastfeeding was one of the main factors for several mothers in believing that children need mothers primarily. Other participants with children around kindergarten age did not emphasize the biological dimension; instead, they emphasized the social needs of the children. As for the difference between having only one and two children (only 4 out of 16 mothers had two children), there is a possibility that the tendency for maternal gatekeeping reduces in the second child. To exemplify:

The first time I took unpaid leave, it was my first child and I couldn't take the risk because I didn't know at what points I could take over care and at which points I could hand over. There is a little more commitment with the first child, you never want to let go. But in the second, you see at what points you can let the child go and when it will make a difference if you are with them. (interviewee 7)

One exceptional case was that one participant immigrated to Germany as a family. The decision to immigrate was also related to leaving work. The mother stated that work-life balance and the guilt of not having time for the child as the main reasons for leaving work. Also, believing that the child would have a better future in Germany, they decided to leave Turkey. Including that, 11 out of 16 participants are living in metropolitan cities. Four participants live in Istanbul, and 3 participants live in Ankara. For those living in Istanbul, living conditions are related to the issues regarding care work. Mothers cannot receive social support when they do not live near their family members. When it comes to receiving childcare services at home, they mentioned the high cost of hiring a caregiver; even part-time babysitters with primary school education demand too much money—it is too much even for these participants, given their higher socioeconomic status compared to Turkey average. It was also stated before that it can take three to four hours to take the child to a half-hour playgroup and return home in Istanbul. However, the provision of childcare services for children under the age of 3 is higher in Istanbul and Izmir compared to smaller cities. Participants from small cities such as Aydın and Manisa stated that there are no private childcare services for the 0-3 age group or they have not heard of any. Hence, living in a metropolitan city has both advantages and disadvantages when it comes to care work. There are more options in big cities, but the quality and the utility of such options are still problematic.

4.14. Mothers' Policy Recommendations

This section is derived from the interviews with the mothers, specifically from the 'opinions on childcare' theme of the interview questionnaire.

The extension of paternal leave was a recursive suggestion made by most of the mothers. Paternal leave is only five days after the child's birth in Turkey. This policy reinforces the traditional gender roles and existing gendered division of labour in childcare by equating parental leave to maternal leave, assigning mothers as sole and primary caregivers. Aware of this fact, mothers argue that the duration of paternal leave in Turkey is unacceptable and must be revised.

The provision of public childcare services is another policy recommendation. Public childcare services, especially for the 0-3 age group provided by the state, are very

limited, even though mothers are expected to return to work after sixteen weeks of maternal leave. Some participants argued that such a contradiction of the state implies that mothers should not work from the standpoint of the state.

While it is a right to take unpaid leave for two years for public sector workers, it is not the case for private sector workers because it is left to the initiatives of employers. Thus, workers in the private sector cannot use their rights when employers do not allow taking unpaid leave. Hence, implementation and supervision of the existing leave policies are also necessary.

Several mothers asserted that the structure of workplaces and the public sphere must be physically designed to the needs of parents and mothers. They argue that physical working conditions are not suitable for working mothers; thus, better physical conditions should be provided for mothers. For example, when working during breastfeeding, sometimes they have to pump milk in restrooms because there is no other option, which raises health concerns for both mothers and children. Also, there need to be more separate baby care rooms and breastfeeding rooms in public facilities, and these rooms are established under the assumption that mothers would take care of the baby and sometimes fathers cannot take care of the child. Hence, some mothers suggested that the caring rooms must be provided suitable for the use of both parents.

One of the recursive recommendations is based on providing social and moral support for mothers through support groups and a support line. Several mothers stated that they had hardships, especially during the postpartum period, due to feeling alone in their experiences. Some of them emphasized the need for social support for mothers, especially in the first periods after giving birth. They proposed that there should be support groups where mothers can meet up and provide moral support for each other by talking about their experiences. Since professional mothers leaving work to provide childcare are a specific group of women, these women felt alone in their situation. Also, when mothers are taking care of children by themselves, sometimes they do not have the option to leave the child even for a few hours. Stating this difficulty, some mothers suggest establishing a support line among mothers or professional instant support mechanisms such as hourly-nursing homes.

Some mothers argued that two years unpaid leave policy must be extended to 3 years so that parents themselves could provide care in the critical age of children. Also, a few participants suggested paid leave for parents taking care of their children.

Ultimately, some of the recommendations have the risk of reinforcing mothers' role as primary caregivers. The problem is that when a leave policy is provided to parents, it is always mothers who take the leave. Also, the extension of the existing unpaid leave policies might perpetuate the already existing familialism of the social policies in Turkey, where care work is a duty assigned to families rather than a responsibility of the state. Hence, it is crucial to be aware of the unintended consequences of possible social policies on parental leave, childcare, and motherhood.

4.15. Conclusion

In this chapter, the main findings from the research are presented, along with a discussion of the findings. This chapter consists of the analysis of data obtained from the 16 interviews conducted with the participants. The data analysis is based on the main research question followed by two sub-questions of the study as well as the themes primarily constituted the interviews. Throughout the chapter, the findings based on interview themes are provided to make connections with the research questions of the study. As for the main question of why professional women leave work after becoming mothers, the findings revealed three overarching themes of reasons, which are discussed in detail throughout the chapter. Furthermore, the implications of leaving work in mothers' lives are presented. Afterwards, the relationship between opting out as a gendered practice and motherhood ideology is analysed. The last part presented mothers' policy recommendations on parental leave, childcare and motherhood.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

I am surrounded by unhappy women. Women, some of whom quit their jobs after giving birth to be “good mothers” and cannot find the job they left after a while. Another group are women who do not quit their job after becoming mothers and “have both children and careers” but constantly question their motherhood and feel guilty. The other group is women, whether married or single, who are exposed to social pressure because they do not prefer to have children. (Öztürk, 2021, para. 1)

This study aimed to understand why professional women employees leave work after becoming mothers. The main research objective was to understand the social, structural, and cultural factors behind professional women leaving work after becoming mothers in Turkey. The main research objective was followed by two further objectives—to understand the implications of leaving work on the lives of these mothers and the relationship between the social phenomenon of mothers’ opting out of work and motherhood ideology. In accordance with the research objectives, semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with 16 mothers—women who used to work in professional and managerial jobs and left work permanently and for a certain period after becoming mothers. The findings of the research demonstrate that opting out is a gendered practice. Instead of being an individual issue, these women leaving work is a social phenomenon consisting of social, cultural and structural dimensions based on gender relations. The findings revealed three overarching themes regarding the reasons for leaving work—work-life conflict, intensive motherhood, and workplace mobbing.

According to the mothers' experiences and perceptions, the conservative feature of the welfare state of Turkey is still prevalent, especially in care policies. The overall picture presented by this study is in line with that of Turkey, by a "supported familialism" of the care policies; based on conservative family understanding, the state assigns care work to the responsibility of families (Aybars et al., 2018, p. 133). This responsibility automatically falls on to women, and the gendered division of labour in domestic and care work becomes the main component of work-life conflict—a structural obstacle for women to remain and progress in the labour market. Hence, as the components of work-life conflict, the lack of social support and affordable quality childcare services led to mothers' leaving work. Getting social support from family members is a common practice in Turkey, which is also related to the lack of affordable quality childcare services. It can be said that the two factors reinforce each other under the familialism of existing care policies of the state. Hence, both serve as a social and structural reason behind mothers' opting out of work.

In this study, these are households with higher socioeconomic status stem from higher education and income levels both of the mothers and their partners, and mostly they stated that both their partners and themselves do not share values of conservative gender ideology in society, such as the male breadwinner and female homemaker model. Nevertheless, the gendered division of labour and traditional gender roles still persist within these households in most cases, mainly regarding childcare. Only three of the mothers interviewed in the study highlighted having an equal division of labour in childcare and domestic work. Mostly, both the participants and their partners work in professional jobs in high-intensity workplaces. Hence, most of them have priorly arranged a method for domestic work, primarily having professional support for household chores. Apart from that, the primary responsibility of children belongs to mothers, and after leaving work, they usually spend more time on domestic work than their partners. Fathers' role in childcare is limited to fulfilling the children's leisure time through play. In this sense, mothers primarily define fathers as playmates when they are asked about the fathers' role in childcare. Hence, the findings on professional working women align with the that "unpaid care and domestic work remains the main barrier to women's economic empowerment, preventing women from getting into, remaining in, and progressing in the labour force" (Osten-Tan, 2019, para. 4).

Furthermore, the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic as a dimension are included in this study since the research took place after the outbreak of COVID-19 and the lockdown period. The findings show that mothers' share of domestic and care work duties had increased during the pandemic. This happened regardless of their socioeconomic status since their purchasing power became irrelevant under the pandemic conditions—as indicated in previous research from İlkaracan and Memiş (2021). This is mainly because, under the pandemic and lockdown conditions, mothers couldn't get social support from their family members and professional support for household chores and childcare. Given that, in most cases, fathers' role in childcare is limited to being playmates, women's responsibilities over domestic and care work have increased. Thus, the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated the already existing gendered division of labour in domestic and care work. This also resulted in mothers' questioning their priorities in terms of employment and motherhood when working from home and taking care of children simultaneously became impossible. These served some of the mothers' decisions to leave work, where the concept of personal choice again becomes questionable when so many social and structural factors are operating.

Also, when mothers work intensively with a busy schedule, they feel a pang of working mother guilt because they think they steal their children's time—their time becomes children's time. Hence, a change in the concept of time and the mothers' priorities is prominent due to work-life conflict. It does not mean that these mothers happily left their careers; in fact, they were longing for working life. Even if they mostly internalize the idea that children primarily need their mothers to provide care, their 'choices' of leaving become "forced choices" (Orgad, 2019) since they face a dilemma in embracing intensive motherhood and nostalgia for working life.

Moreover, workplace mobbing is another factor contributing to mothers' decision to leave work. The already existing workplace mobbing was exacerbated by the mothers' pregnancy. This is related to the motherhood penalty, where working mothers are subject to bias against mothers and indirect as well as direct discrimination.

Furthermore, this study also shows that mothers are downshifting before leaving work. Some of the mothers switch to part-time work to reconcile the work-life conflict, yet,

it has been demonstrated that part-time work is not suitable at the managerial level. Mothers in executive positions still have to work the same hours, if not during working hours, at night because they have to supervise other employees.

In this study, motherhood is discussed as a social institution at the heart of patriarchy and prevailing social norms that impel women to motherhood and confine mothers to unpaid care work in the private sphere. Instead of being simply a biological matter, as O'Reilly (2010) asserts that motherhood “is also a social institution that functions ideologically and politically” (p. 572). Hence, motherhood ideology is at the centre of challenging patriarchy, socially constructed gender roles, and public/private dichotomy. It operates through both socialization of women into motherhood and obscuring women to embrace other identities. In society, motherhood is “the greatest achievement of a woman’s life: the sole true means of self-realization” (Oakley, 1975, p. 186). By this means, being a mother signals a socially rewarded status despite the struggles such as the motherhood penalty. In the case of women from professional and managerial positions, they work in high-intensity work environments that offer poor work-life balance and suffer from gender inequalities in the workplace, and mobbing, all of which are intensified once they have children. Under such circumstances, they either continue working double shifts at work and home without social support or they become intensive mothers. While there may be different forms of motherhood ideology, intensive mothering ideology (Hays, 1996) bears a resemblance to ‘sacred motherhood’ in Turkey, where total sacrifice and devotion are promoted as virtues of a mother. Align with all of these, it is possible to explain professional women leaving work after becoming mothers as women’s identity construction through motherhood, their internalization of intensive motherhood ideology and their developing strategies to overcome the struggles of being a professional worker as a woman. Hence, opting out of work or leaving work for a particular time to become full-time mothers comes across as a strategy—which can be conceptualised as *strategic motherhood*. Such a strategy can be regarded as professional mothers’ “bargaining with patriarchy” which refers to the strategies developed by women to gain relative power and autonomy within the boundaries of patriarchal oppression (Kandiyoti, 1988).

Moreover, a remarkable finding from this study that these women bear a mental burden of the household and care arrangements will expand the concept of women’s double

burden or second shift (Hochschild & Machung, 1989), which is substantially used in feminist literature. In the case of professional women, the unpaid domestic work of double burden may take the form of a mental burden since they mostly have the tools to receive professional, paid support on domestic and care tasks. However, they still carry the responsibility of the arrangements or operations regarding domestic and care work. This implies that the gendered division of labour within the household persists by taking various forms. In view of such patterns, the striking point is that this mental burden serves both as a reason to leave work and a consequence of leaving work. One way or another, they would still carry the mental burden and be responsible for the task assignment in domestic and care work. Hence, leaving paid work seems more convenient for these mothers instead of carrying such a mental burden.

As with the majority of studies, the current study is subject to several limitations. Thus, the results of this study must be seen in the light of two main methodological limitations. First, it should be noted that this study is based on the experiences of a particular group of women. The participants of the study are well-educated and work in professional, predominantly in decision-making positions—thus, they represent a group of a higher socioeconomic status. Hence, professional women’s experiences cannot provide an explanation for the experiences of different groups of people. Second, this study is based on qualitative research objectives with the aim of getting an in-depth understanding of the experience of a small group of people. Thus, considering the small sample size, it is not possible to derive generalizations from the results of this study.

The target group of this study is chosen as professional women employees because although the opting-out literature has proliferated around professional women in the past two decades (Williams et al., 2006; Stone, 2007; Jones, 2012; Orgad, 2019), there is not enough research specifically on this topic in Turkey. This study contributes to the existing literature by fulfilling this gap. Hence, the primary contribution of this study is presenting findings on the experiences of a particular group—women from professional and managerial jobs, who can be regarded as a minority since they work in a male-dominated sector in Turkey.

A further contribution of this study is providing qualitative research on women's work motherhood in general based on a feminist theoretical framework with the aim of challenging the existing literature on opting out by narrating women's lived experiences. Opting out emerged as a choice—in which professional women leaving their careers to take care of their children (Belkin, 2003) and the literature accumulated on opting out has been questioned whether it was a choice or an outcome of the work-life conflict of professional mothers (Stone, 2007; Jones, 2012). This study indicates that to accept that women leave their careers after becoming mothers as a personal choice or a preference means taking gender relations for granted. The findings from women's own narratives challenge the idea that such an opting-out pattern is individual rather than social. Based on a critique of choice, mothers' personal choices cannot be regarded as separate from gender relations and prevailing social norms. By shedding light on the social, cultural and structural reasons why these women left their jobs, this study justifies its primary argument—that personal is political.

As issues regarding women's paid, unpaid domestic and care work and motherhood are central to the feminist debate and to challenge the patriarchal system, understanding why there is a pattern of women leaving work after becoming mothers is highly crucial. This study presents a feminist qualitative analysis of professional women's lived experiences of opting out of work after becoming mothers. Nevertheless, the major focus of this study is on the experiences of a specific group of women. Further research on the experiences of diverse groups of women is needed to acquire a more comprehensive understanding of women's opt-out of work. For example, how blue-collar women employees experience the processes of becoming a mother and leaving work might be a research question for further studies.

Moreover, the current study indicates that opting out of work and embracing motherhood as the primary identity by mothers come across as a form of strategy towards work-life conflict and workplace mobbing. It is crucial to discuss various strategies developed by women to cope with the problems they face regarding paid and unpaid domestic and care work in general. Hence, research on such strategies may pose new avenues to explore in future studies.

Also, since this is a qualitative study with the limitations of being unable to provide a general explanation of the experiences of professional women leaving work, there is a need for further research based on different methods, especially in the absence of studies on this topic in Turkey. Hence, research with different methods, such as mixed methods, will contribute to the opting-out literature with the possibility of providing more in-depth findings.

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APPENDICES

A. APPROVAL OF THE METU HUMAN SUBJECTS ETHICS COMMITTEE

UYGULAMALI ETİK ARAŞTIRMA MERKEZİ
APPLIED ETHICS RESEARCH CENTER



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04 AĞUSTOS 2022

Konu: Değerlendirme Sonucu


Gönderen: ODTÜ İnsan Araştırmaları Etik Kurulu (İAEK)

İlgi: İnsan Araştırmaları Etik Kurulu Başvurusu

Sayın Doç. Dr. Ayşe İdil AYBARS

Danışmanlığımı yürüttüğünüz Esra GÜVEN'in "TÜRKİYEDE ORTAYA ÇIKAN MUHAFAZAKAR İDEOLOJİYİ GÖZ ÖNÜNDE BULUNDURARAK KADINLARIN ANNELİĞİ NASIL DENEYİMLEDİĞİ VE ANNELİK MİTİNE MEYDAN OKUYACAK STRATEJİLERİ NASIL GELİŞTİRDİĞİ ÜZERİNE BİR ÇALIŞMA" başlıklı araştırması İnsan Araştırmaları Etik Kurulu tarafından uygun görülerek gerekli onay 0445-ODTÜİAEK-2022 protokol numarası ile onaylanmıştır.

Bilgilerinize saygılarımla sunarım.



Prof. Dr. Mine MISIRLISOY
Başkan

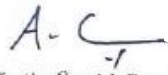

Doç. Dr. İ. Semih AKÇOMAK
Üye


Dr. Öğretim Üyesi Müge GÖNDÜZ
Üye


Dr. Öğretim Üyesi Şerife SEVİNÇ
Üye


Dr. Öğretim Üyesi Murat Perit ÇAKIR
Üye


Dr. Öğretim Üyesi Süreyya ÖZCAN KABASAKAL
Üye


Dr. Öğretim Üyesi A. Emre TURGUT
Üye

B. INFORMED CONSENT FORM

Bu araştırma, ODTÜ Toplumsal Cinsiyet ve Kadın Çalışmaları Bölümü Yüksek Lisans öğrencisi Esra Güven tarafından Doç. Dr. Ayşe İdil Aybars danışmanlığındaki yüksek lisans tezi kapsamında yürütülmektedir. Bu form sizi araştırma koşulları hakkında bilgilendirmek için hazırlanmıştır.

Çalışmanın Amacı Nedir?

Araştırmanın amacı, orta ve üst düzey çalışırken anne olduktan sonra tam zamanlı çocuk bakımı sağlamak amacıyla işten ayrılan kadınların işten ayrılma olgusunu ve bu olgunun arkasında yatan nedenleri incelemektir.

Bize Nasıl Yardımcı Olmanızı İsteyeceğiz?

Araştırmaya katılmayı kabul ederseniz, sizden yaklaşık olarak bir saat sürmesi beklenen görüşmelere katılmanız beklenmektedir. Bu görüşmelerde sizlere ucu açık sorular sorulacak ve bu sorular doğrultusunda kendi deneyimlerinizi aktarmanız beklenecektir. Daha sonra içerik analizi ile değerlendirilmek üzere görüşmeler ses kaydı alınacaktır.

Sizden Topladığımız Bilgileri Nasıl Kullanacağız?

Araştırmaya katılımınız tamamen gönüllülük temelinde olmalıdır. Çalışmada sizden kimlik veya kurum belirleyici hiçbir bilgi istenmemektedir. Cevaplarınız tamamıyla gizli tutulacak ve sadece araştırmacı tarafından değerlendirilecektir. Katılımcılardan elde edilecek bilgiler toplu halde değerlendirilecek ve bilimsel yayımlarda kullanılacaktır.

Katılımla ilgili bilmeniz gerekenler:

Görüşmeler, genel olarak kişisel rahatsızlık verecek sorular veya uygulamalar içermemektedir. Ancak, katılım sırasında sorulardan ya da herhangi başka bir nedenden ötürü kendinizi rahatsız hissederseniz görülmeyi yarıda bırakıp çıkmakta serbestsiniz. Böyle bir durumda çalışmayı uygulayan kişiye çalışmadan çıkmak istediğinizi söylemeniz yeterli olacaktır.

Arařtırmayla ilgili daha fazla bilgi almak isterseniz:

Görüşme sonunda, bu çalışmayla ilgili sorularınız cevaplanacaktır. Bu çalışmaya katıldığınız için şimdiden teşekkür ederiz. Çalışma hakkında daha fazla bilgi almak için Toplumsal Cinsiyet ve Kadın Çalışmaları Bölümü öğretim üyelerinden Doç. Dr. Ayşe İdil Aybars (E-posta: aybars@metu.edu.tr) ya da yüksek lisans öğrencisi Esra Güven (E-posta: esra.guven@metu.edu.tr) ile iletişim kurabilirsiniz.

Yukarıdaki bilgileri okudum ve bu çalışmaya tamamen gönüllü olarak katılıyorum.

(Formu doldurup imzaladıktan sonra uygulayıcıya geri veriniz).

İsim Soyad

Tarih

İmza

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C. INTERVIEW QUESTIONNAIRE

1. Demografik Bilgiler

1. A. Katılımcı

- Yaş
- Eğitim durumu
- Meslek
- İş deneyimi (yıl olarak)
- İşten ayrılalı geçen zaman
- Aylık gelir (işten ayrılmadan önce)
- Medeni durum
- Evlilik yaşı (evlilik durumu varsa)
- Çocuk sahibi olma yaşı (İlk ve sonrakiler)

1. B. Partner (varsa)

- Eğitim durumu
- Meslek
- İş deneyimi (yıl olarak)

1. C. Çocuk

- Yaş

1. D. Hane

- İkamet yeri
- Hanenin ortalama toplam geliri

2. İş Hayatı

- Çalışırken bir gününüz nasıl geçirdi?
- İş yerinde sorumluluklarınızı / görevlerinizi anlatır mısınız?
- Çalışma koşullarınızdan bahsedebilir misiniz? (seyahat, toplantı yoğunluğu, deadline'lar vb.)

- Çocuk sahibi olmadan önce iş ve özel hayatınızı dengeleme konusunda problem yaşıyor muydunuz? Evet ise, anlatır mısınız?
- Siz çalışırken ev içi iş bölümü nasıldı? Kim hangi işleri yapıyordu?

3. İşten Ayrılma / İş-Sonrası Yaşam

- Anne olmak iş hayatınızı nasıl etkiledi?
- İşten ayrılma kararına nasıl vardınız? Nasıl bir süreçti?
- Bu karar almanızda rol oynayan etkenler nelerdi?
- İşten ayrıldığınızda kariyeriniz nasıl bir noktadaydı? Ayrılmanız şu an hangi noktada olurdu?
- İş hayatınızla ilgili özlediğiniz / eksikliğini duyduğunuz konular var mı? Biraz anlatır mısınız?
- İşe geri dönmeyi istiyor musunuz / düşünüyor musunuz? Neden?
- İşe geri döndüyseniz, bu kararınızdan memnun musunuz?
- İşe geri döndüyseniz, bu kararınızı etkileyen faktörler nelerdi?

4. Hane İçi İş Bölümü / Çocuk Bakımı

- İşten ayrıldıktan sonra bir gününüz nasıl geçmeye başladı?
- İşten ayrıldıktan sonra ev içi iş bölümü değişti mi? Şu an nasıl?
- Ev içinde çocuk bakımı için nasıl bir yöntem izliyorsunuz?
- (Varsa) Partnerinizin çocuk bakımındaki rolü nedir?
- (Partneriniz varsa) Çocuk bakımının nasıl yapılacağına dair planlamalar yaptınız mı? Ortak kararlar mı alındı?
- Bakım için hangi seçenekleri düşündünüz?
- Çocuk bakımını kendiniz üstlenmeye karar vermenizde etkili olan nedenler neydi?
- Çocuk bakımı için ailenizde/çevrenizde size destek olabilecek birileri var mıydı?
EVET ise, neden bakımı kendiniz üstlenmeye karar verdiniz?
- Bakım için ücretli destek alabileceğiniz bir kuruluş var mıydı?
EVET ise, neden bakımı kendiniz üstlenmeye karar verdiniz?

5. Sosyal Çevre

- Çocuk bakımı / annelik / işten ayrılma konularında aile ve akrabalarınızın tepkisi / düşüncesi nasıl oldu?
- Çocuk bakımı / annelik / işten ayrılma konularında arkadaşla, tanıdıklar ve iş arkadaşlarınızın tepkisi / düşüncesi nasıl oldu?
- İşe geri döndüyseniz partnerizin tepkisi ne oldu?
- İşe geri döndüyseniz çevrenizin tepkisi ne oldu?

6. Çocuk Bakımı Hakkında Kişisel Görüşler

- Sizce çocuk bakımı için var olan imkanlar yeterli mi? Neden? Bu konuda önerileriniz var mı?
- Çocuk bakımı sağlamak için en ideal yöntem nedir? Neden?
- Babaların işten ayrılıp çocuk bakımını üstlenmesi hakkında ne düşünüyorsunuz?
- Sizin çocuk bakımı için belirlediğiniz yöntemlerden memnun musunuz? Şöyle olsa daha iyi olurdu dediğiniz şeyler var mı?
- Bu süreçte karşılaştığınız en önemli zorluklar neler oldu?
- Bu süreçte edindiğiniz en önemli kazanımlar neler oldu?

7. Annelik Algıları ve Söylem

- Ailenizden ve çevrenizden çocuk sahibi olma konusunda yorumlar aldınız mı? Aldıysanız bunların çocuk sahibi olmanızda etkisi oldu mu? Nasıl?
- Sizin için annelik nedir? Kısaca tanımlar mısınız?
- Sizce annelik bir kadın için gereklilik midir? Neden?
- Sizce annelerin belirli görevleri var mıdır? Varsa, nelerdir?
- Anneler ve babalar arasında çocuklarla kurulan ilişki açısından fark mıdır? Varsa, nedir?
- İyi anne / kötü anne gibi bir ayırım hakkında ne düşünüyorsunuz?
- “Kadının yeri evidir” sözü hakkında ne düşünüyorsunuz?
- “Annelik kadının fitratında vardır” sözü hakkında ne düşünüyorsunuz?
- Sizce kadınlar kaç çocuk sahibi olmalıdır? Her kadının üç çocuk sahibi olması hakkında ne düşünüyorsunuz?

D. TURKISH SUMMARY / TÜRKÇE ÖZET

Bu çalışma, profesyonel kadın çalışanların anne olduktan sonra neden işten ayrıldıklarını anlamaya yöneliktir. Bu çalışmada temel hedef grubu olarak beyaz yakalı profesyonel kadın çalışanların seçilmesinin nedeni, son yirmi yılda işten ayrılma literatürü profesyonel kadın çalışanlar etrafında ilerlerken (Williams vd., 2006: Stone, 2007: Jones, 2012: Orgad, 2019), Türkiye’de bu konu üzerinde yeterli araştırma bulunmamaktadır. Dolayısıyla bu çalışma bu eksikliği gidererek mevcut literatüre katkı sağlamayı amaçlamaktadır. Bu çalışmanın temel katkısı, belirli bir grup kadının, yani anne olduktan sonra kariyerlerini bırakan profesyonel kadınların, yaşanmış deneyimlerini anlatmak amacıyla, feminist kuramsal çerçeveye dayanan nitel bir araştırma sağlamasıdır. Araştırmanın temel amacı, Türkiye’de eğitim seviyesi yüksek, beyaz yakalı, profesyonel kadınların anne olduktan sonra ücretli işten ayrılma kararlarının ardındaki sosyal, yapısal ve kültürel faktörleri anlamak ve aktarmaktır. Bu bağlamda, araştırmanın temel sorusunu iki soru takip etmektedir: (I) ücretli işten ayrılmanın annelerin yaşamlarına etkileri ve (II) profesyonel meslek sahibi kadınların işten ayrılma sosyal olgusu ile annelik ideolojisi arasındaki ilişki. Araştırma amaçları doğrultusunda, daha önce profesyonel ve yönetici pozisyonlarda çalışmış ve anne olduktan sonra işten ayrılmış 16 anne ile yarı yapılandırılmış derinlemesine görüşmeler yapılmıştır. Ayrıca, asıl çalışmanın öncesinde, çalışmanın uygulanabilirliğini değerlendirmek ve mülakat sorularının ön testini yapmak amacıyla 4 katılımcı ile bir pilot çalışma yapılmıştır.

Çalışmanın birinci bölümünde araştırma soruları ve araştırma amaçları belirtilmiştir. Araştırma konusunun arka planı ve tezin önemi bu bölümde ağırlıklı olarak ortaya konulmuştur. İkinci bölümde annelik, kadın istihdamı, kadınların ücretsiz hane içi ve bakım emeği konularına ilişkin bir literatür taraması feminist kuramsal çerçeveden hareketle ayrıntılı olarak ele alınmıştır. Üçüncü bölümde, araştırmanın örnekleme, veri toplama ve veri analiz süreçleri hakkında bilgiler ile araştırmanın sınırlılıkları ve güçlü yönlerinden oluşan araştırmanın metodolojisi açıklanmıştır. Dördüncü bölümde,

mülakatlardan doğrudan örnekler verilerek çalışmanın bulguları ve tartışması sunulmuştur. Beşinci bölümde çalışmanın sonuç kısmı yer almaktadır.

Bu çalışmada ele alınan iki temel konu annelik ve kadının ücretli ve ücretsiz emeğidir, çünkü annelerin ücretli işten ayrılması ağırlıklı olarak bu iki konuyu kapsamaktadır. Annelik ve kadınların hem ücretli hem de ücretsiz emeği, feminist tartışmanın başlıca konularındandır. Bu çalışmada, kadınları anneliğe atfeden ve anneleri özel alanda ücretsiz bakım emeğine hapseden ataerkil sistemin ve sosyal olarak inşa edilen toplumsal cinsiyet rollerinin merkezinde yer alan annelik, toplumsal bir kurum olarak ele alınmaktadır. O'Reilly'nin (2010) iddia ettiği gibi, sadece biyolojik bir mesele olmak yerine, annelik “aynı zamanda ideolojik ve politik olarak işleyen sosyal bir kurumdur” (s. 572). Bu nedenle, annelik ideolojisi, ataerkil sisteme, geleneksel toplumsal cinsiyet rollerine ve kamusal/özel ikiliğine meydan okumanın merkezinde yer alır. Annelik ideolojisinin farklı biçimlerini tanımlamak mümkün olsa da, yoğun annelik ideolojisi (Hays, 1996), fedakarlığın ve tam bağlılığın bir annelik erdemi olarak kültürel normlar aracılığıyla teşvik edildiği Türkiye'deki ‘kutsal annelik’ ile benzerlik göstermektedir.

Kadınların ücretli ve ücretsiz emeği söz konusu olduğunda, bu çalışmada ağırlıklı olarak kadın istihdamı ile birlikte hane içi ve bakım işlerinde toplumsal cinsiyete dayalı işbölümü konuları ele alınmaktadır. Diğer bir deyişle, kadınların çifte yükünden ya da “ikinci vardiyasından” (Hochschild & Machung, 1989) kaynaklanan sorunlar bu çalışmanın merkezinde yer almaktadır. İşten ayrılma ile ilgili mevcut araştırmalar, çoğunlukla iş-yaşam çatışmasının kadınların istihdamı ve annelerin kariyer seçimleri üzerindeki etkilerini kapsamaktadır. Özellikle küçük çocukların annelerin istihdamı üzerinde güçlü bir etkisinin olduğu (Waldfogel vd., 1999) gösterilmiştir ve diğer ülkelerden elde edilen bu sonuçlar, Türkiye'deki bulgularla örtüşmektedir—Türkiye'de 2020 yılında 1 yaş altında çocuğu olan kadınların istihdam oranı, %85,5 olan erkek istihdam oranına kıyasla %25,2 olarak bulunmuştur. (TÜİK, 2022a). Bu bulgu, Türkiye'de özellikle bakım politikalarında “desteklenen ailecilik” ile muhafazakar aile anlayışına dayalı devletin bakım işini ailelere emanet ettiğini desteklemektedir (Aybars, Beşpınar, & Kalaycıoğlu, 2018, s. 133). Bu doğrultuda bakım ve ev içi sorumluluklarının büyük bir kısmını kadınlar üstlenmektedir. Hızlı tempolu iş ortamında karar verme pozisyonlarında çalışan beyaz yakalı kadınlar söz

konusu olduğunda, yine iş ve hane içi sorumluluklarının çifte yükünü kadınlar taşımaktadır. Dolayısıyla, ev içi ve bakım işlerinde toplumsal cinsiyete dayalı işbölümü, iş-yaşam çatışmasının ana bileşeni haline gelmekte—bu da kadınların işgücü piyasasında kalmaları ve ilerlemeleri önünde yapısal bir engel teşkil etmektedir.

Bu çalışma, kadınların ücretli ve ücretsiz çalışma ile annelik eğilimlerini dikkate alarak, öncelikle işten ayrılma olgusunun toplumsal, kültürel ve yapısal arka planını sunmaktadır. İşi bırakma, profesyonel kadınların çocuklarına bakmak için kariyerlerini bıraktıkları bir seçim olarak ortaya çıkmıştır (Belkin, 2003) ve işten ayrılma üzerine birikmiş literatür, bunu esas olarak profesyonel meslek sahibi annelerin karşılaştığı iş-aile çatışmasının bir sonucu olarak incelemiştir (Stone, 2007; Jones, 2012). Bu çalışma, feminist bir seçim eleştirisi yaparak, profesyonel meslek sahibi annelerin işten ayrılmalarının olası sosyal, yapısal ve kültürel nedenlerini ortaya çıkarmayı amaçlamıştır. Bu annelerin ücretli işten ayrılmasının birçok nedeni olduğu gibi, bu nedenlerin tümünün Türkiye’deki toplumsal cinsiyet örüntülerini işaret ettiği tespit edilmiştir. Hem mevcut devlet politikalarının hem de annelik ideolojisinin profesyonel meslek sahibi kadınların anne olduktan sonra işten ayrılmalarını etkilediği söylenebilir. Bu çalışmadaki kişisel tercih eleştirisi, annelerin bu bağlamda kişisel tercihlerinin toplumsal cinsiyet ilişkilerinden ve toplumun mevcut sosyal yapısından ayrı düşünülmemeyeceğini göstermiştir.

Araştırmanın bulguları, ücretli işten ayrılmanın toplumsal cinsiyete dayalı bir örüntü olduğunu göstermiştir. Annelerin işten ayrılmaları bireysel bir mesele olmaktan çok, toplumsal cinsiyet ilişkilerine dayalı, toplumsal, kültürel ve yapısal boyutları olan toplumsal bir olgudur. Bulgular, profesyonel meslek sahibi kadınların anne olduktan sonra işten ayrılma nedenlerine ilişkin üç ana kategoriyi ortaya çıkarmıştır: (I) iş-yaşam çatışması, (II) yoğun annelik ve (III) işyerinde mobbing. Görüşülen annelerden 13 tanesi işten ayrılmalarının temel nedeni olarak yoğun ücretli işi yoğun bakım ve hane işleri ile birleştiremedikleri iş-yaşam çatışmasını belirtmiştir. Bunlar, hem katılımcıların hem de partnerlerinin yüksek eğitim ve gelir düzeylerinden kaynaklanan yüksek sosyoekonomik statüye sahip hanelerdir ve çoğunluğu, hem eşlerinin hem de kendilerinin ‘evi geçindiren erkek-ev işlerini yapan kadın’ modeli gibi muhafazakar toplumsal cinsiyet ideolojisi değerlerini paylaşmadıklarını belirtmiştir. Bununla birlikte, toplumsal cinsiyete dayalı işbölümü ve geleneksel toplumsal cinsiyet rolleri,

çoğu durumda, özellikle çocuk bakımı konusunda, bu hanelerde de karşımıza çıkmaktadır. Araştırmada görüşülen annelerden sadece üçü, çocuk bakımı ve hane içi işlerde eşit işbölümüne sahip olduklarını belirtmiştir. Çoğunlukla, hem katılımcılar hem de partnerleri, yoğun iş temposu olan profesyonel işlerde çalışmaktadır. Bu nedenle, hanelerin çoğu ev içi işler için profesyonel destek almaktadır. Bunun dışında, çocukların asıl sorumluluğu annelerde olmakla birlikte anneler işten ayrıldıktan sonra genellikle partnerlerine göre ev işlerine daha fazla zaman ayırmaya başlamaktadırlar. Babaların çocuk bakımındaki rolü, çocukların boş zamanlarını oyun yoluyla gidermekle sınırlıdır. Bu anlamda annelere babanın çocuk bakımındaki rolü sorulduğunda çoğunlukla babayı oyun arkadaşı olarak tanımlamaktadırlar. Dolayısıyla, profesyonel meslek sahibi kadınlara ilişkin bulgular, “hane içi sorumluluklar ve bakım işi, kadınların ekonomik olarak güçlenmesinin önündeki en büyük engel olmaya devam etmekte ve kadınların işgücüne katılmasını, işgücünde kalmasını ve ilerlemesini engellemektedir” (Osten-Tan, 2019, para. 4) argümanı ile uyumludur.

Ayrıca, araştırma COVID-19 salgını ve sokağa çıkma yasağı döneminden sonra gerçekleştiği için COVID-19 pandemisinin etkileri bir boyut olarak bu çalışmada yer almaktadır. Bulgular, pandemi sürecinde kadınların ev içi ve bakım yükümlülüklerindeki paylarının arttığını göstermektedir. İlkaracan ve Memiş'in (2021) önceki bir araştırmasında da belirtildiği gibi, bu durum kadınların sosyoekonomik durumlarından bağımsız olarak gerçekleşmiş, pandemi koşullarında satın alma güçleri bu anlamda önemsiz hale gelmiştir. Bunun başlıca nedeni pandemi ve sokağa çıkma yasağı koşullarında kadınların hem hane içi işlerde hem de çocuk bakımında profesyonel destek ve de aile üyelerinden sosyal destek alamamasıdır. Çoğu durumda babaların çocuk bakımındaki rolünün oyun arkadaşı olmakla sınırlı olduğu göz önünde bulundurulduğunda, kadınların hane içi işler ve çocukların temel bakımı konusunda sorumluluklarının arttığı aşikardır. Dolayısıyla, COVID-19 salgını, hane içi emek ve bakım emeğinde halihazırda var olan toplumsal cinsiyete dayalı işbölümünü pekiştirmiştir. Ayrıca bu durum, aynı anda hem evden çalışma hem de çocuk bakmanın imkansız hale gelmesiyle annelerin iş ve annelik konusundaki önceliklerini sorgulamasına neden olmuştur. Tüm bunlar, bazı annelerin işten ayrılma

kararına hizmet etmiş; burada, işleyen çok sayıda sosyal ve yapısal faktör varken kişisel tercih kavramını yeniden sorgulanabilir hale getirmiştir.

Araştırmanın çarpıcı bir bulgusu, kadınların ağırlıklı olarak hane ve çocuk bakımı operasyonunun zihinsel yükünü taşımaları, yani asıl işi kendileri yapmasalar bile zihinsel ve yönetsel olarak işin gerçekleştirilmesinden sorumlu olmalarıdır. Katılımcıların çoğu, aile ve evle ilgili konuların her zaman akıllarının bir köşesinde olduğunu belirtmiştir. Onlardan öncelikle hanenin işleyişini düzenlemeleri, çocuk bakımı ve hane içi işler ile ilgili neleri yapıp neleri yapmamaları gerektiği konusunda partnerlerine rehberlik etmeleri beklenmektedir. Bu kadınlar profesyonel meslek sahibi kişiler olduğu ve birçoğu çalışma hayatında yönetsel pozisyonlarda rol aldığı için çalışan kimlikleri annelik kimliklerine yansımaktadır. Hane bireyleri, özellikle partnerleri tarafından bu tür operasyonel görevleri yerine getirmeleri de beklenmektedir. Bunun nedeni, ‘bu işte daha iyi olmaları’ ve babaların kontrolü annelere devretmeye gönüllü olmalarıdır. Bu örüntüler doğrultusunda, dikkat çekici olan nokta, bu zihinsel yükün hem işten ayrılma nedeni hem de işten ayrılmanın bir sonucu olmasıdır. Bu kadınlar için, ücretli işten ayrılmamak hane içi işler ve bakım işleri konusunda görev atamasından sorumlu olmak ve ücretli iş yükü ile zihinsel yükün birleşiminden kaynaklanan bir çifte yüke maruz kalmak anlamına gelmektedir. Dolayısıyla bu tür bir çifte yükü taşımak yerine ücretli işten ayrılmak bu anneler için stratejik bir seçenek olarak görünmektedir.

Bir diğer işten ayrılma nedenini katılımcıların yoğun anneliği benimsemesi oluşturmaktadır. Bu anneler, çocuklarıyla birlikte olmayı ve çocukların ihtiyaçlarını öncelik olarak belirtmişlerdir. Bu annelerden bir grup özellikle doğumdan sonraki ilk birkaç yılda anne ve çocuk arasındaki biyolojik bağı, diğer grup ise çocuklarının sosyal ihtiyaçlarını vurgulamıştır. Sonuç olarak, bulgular, Oakley’nin (1975) annelik ideolojisi—tüm çocukların annelerine ihtiyacı olduğu ve tüm annelerin çocuklarına ihtiyacı olduğu, tanımı ile uyumludur (p. 186). Anneler işe gittiklerinde “çalışan anne suçluluğu” hissetmekte ve bu durum, bu ilişki içindedir (Epp & Velagaleti, 2004, s. 920). Bu çalışmadaki anneler, çok yoğun çalışma koşulları altında çalışmış olup çocuklarının zamanını çaldıklarını düşündükleri için kendilerini suçlu hissettiklerini belirtmişlerdir, çünkü onlara göre artık onların zamanı çocukların zamanı demektir. Bu nedenle, katılımcıların çoğunluğu için anne olduktan sonra önceliklerinde olduğu

kadar zaman kavramında da bir deęişiklik ön plana çıkmaktadır. Tüm bunlar annelerin kişisel bir tercih olarak kariyerlerini bırakmayı seçtikleri anlamına gelmez; aksine bu noktada işten ayrılmayı “zorunlu seçimler (forced choices)” (Orgad, 2019) olarak ele almak mümkündür. İş yerinde profesyonel ve yönetsel pozisyonlarda çalışan kadınların karşılaştıkları toplumsal cinsiyet eşitsizliğine dayalı dinamikler, yoğun iş temposu, iş-yaşam çatışması; tüm bunlarla birlikte çalışan annelerin suçluluk duygusu ve yoğun annelik ideolojisinin içselleştirilmesi, kadınların işten ayrılarak annelik üzerinden kimlik inşasını bir strateji veya iş-yaşam çatışmasına dayalı sorunlarla başa çıkma mekanizması olarak okumak mümkündür. Aynı zamanda iş hayatına duyulan özlem kendi içlerinde yaşadıkları çelişkilerin de sinyallerini vermektedir.

İş-yaşam çatışmasına hizmet eden diğer işten ayrılma nedenleri ise çocuk bakımı için sosyal desteğe sahip olunmaması ve ekonomik, erişilebilir ve kaliteli çocuk bakım hizmetlerinin olmaması olarak ortaya çıkmıştır. Türkiye’de geniş aile üyelerinden çocuk bakımı için sosyal destek almak yaygın bir uygulama olmakla birlikte aslında bu durum da erişilebilir ve kaliteli çocuk bakım hizmetlerinin olmamasıyla da ilgilidir. Devletin mevcut bakım politikalarının ailecilik üzerinden yürütülmesi, bakım işini ailenin sorumluluğuna bırakmaktadır. Kadınların bakım emeğini sağlayacak öncelikli kişiler olarak atfedilmesiyle birlikte, bakım işinin büyük bir bölümü kadının üstüne kalmaktadır. Dolayısıyla, çocuk bakımında sosyal ve profesyonel destek bulunamaması, anne olduktan sonra kadınların işten ayrılmasının arkasında hem toplumsal hem de yapısal bir neden oluşturmaktadır.

Ayrıca, iş yerinde psikolojik yıldırma (mobbing) katılımcıların işten ayrılmalarının arkasında yatan nedenlerden biri olarak ortaya çıkmıştır. Bazı katılımcıların deneyimlerine göre annelikten bağımsız olarak zaten var olan yıldırma, kişiler hamile kaldıktan ya da anne olduktan sonra şiddetlenmiştir. Bu, çalışan annelerin, hamile veya anne olan kişilere karşı önyargıya ve doğrudan ya da dolaylı ayrımcılığa maruz kaldığı annelik cezası (the motherhood penalty) ile ilgilidir.

Bu çalışmadaki katılımcılardan 11 tanesi tamamen işi bırakmış, 5 tanesi ücretsiz izin alarak kariyerine bir süreliğine ara vermiştir. Bu iki grubun deneyimleri arasındaki temel farkları belirtmek önemlidir. En temel fark, annelerin özel sektörde mi yoksa kamuda mı çalıştığı üzerinden ilerlemektedir. Ücretsiz izne ayrılan anneler kamuda

çalışan ve bu haklarını kullanabilen kişilerdir. Özel sektörde ücretsiz izne çıkmak desteklenmeyen hatta engellenen bir durum olarak karşımıza çıkmaktadır. Ücretsiz izne ayrılan annelerde, yoğun annelik ve işyerinde mobbing ile birlikte tükenmişlik hissi başlıca iki nedendir. Üç anne, işte maruz kaldıkları mobbing ve tükenmişlikten bir kaçış yolu olarak kariyerlerine ara vermeyi ve çocuk bakımını üstlenmeyi düşünmüşlerdir. Bu durumda, profesyonel meslek sahibi kadınların annelik yoluyla iş hayatındaki mücadelelerine belirli bir süre ara vermesi tekrar bir strateji olarak ortaya çıkmaktadır. Diğer iki anne, özellikle ilk iki ila üç yılda anneler ve çocuklar arasındaki özel bağı vurgulamıştır. Yoğun anneliği benimsemekle birlikte aynı zamanda çocukların birincil alanlarının ve ihtiyaçlarının üç yaşından sonra değiştiğini savunmaktadırlar. Çocukların sosyal ihtiyaçları geliştikten sonra, anne olarak rollerinin de değiştiğini düşünmektedirler. Bu, üç yaşın altı çocuklar için çocuk bakım hizmetlerinin olmaması, yani anneler için bunun zaten bir seçenek olmamasıyla ilişkilendirilebilir. Mevcut devlet politikalarının ve hakim sosyal normların bakım işini kadınlara yüklediği ve bunun sosyal olarak ödüllendirildiği Türkiye’de, annelerin de stratejik olarak bu rolü benimsemesi şaşırtıcı değildir. Ayrıca, annelerin yoğun anneliği içselleştirme ve benimseme derecelerinin değişkenlik gösterdiğini de belirtmek gerekir.

Katılımcılar arasındaki bir diğer ayırt edici özellik ise işten ayrıldıktan sonra ne kadar zaman geçtiğidir. Özellikle 10 yıl önce işten ayrılan katılımcılar, anneliği çalışma hayatlarının bir uzantısı olarak görme eğilimindedirler. Bu anneler, tam zamanlı anne olmayı bir proje ya da meslek olarak görebilmektedirler. Onlar da her katılımcı gibi çalışma hayatını özlemekte ama bu özlem çocuklar büyüdüklerinde ve kamusal hayata daha fazla katılmaya başladıklarında, yani birincil bakımda annelerine ihtiyaç duymadıklarında artmaktadır. Ayrıca işten ayrı kalınan zaman ilerledikçe işgücü piyasasına geri dönüş zorlaşmaktadır. Daha önce de belirtildiği gibi, kariyere ara verdikten sonra işe geri dönmek işgücü piyasasında önyargıya tabidir. Bu tür bir önyargının erkekler için kadınlara göre daha fazla olması (Weisshaar, 2018), sosyal olarak inşa edilen toplumsal cinsiyet rollerini ve annelerin bakım işini üstlenen birincil kişiler olarak atanmasını pekiştirir. Bu nedenle, kadınların annelik yoluyla kimlik inşası, işgücü piyasasından uzaklaştıkça daha belirgin daha gelebilmektedir.

Bu çalışma aynı zamanda profesyonel ve yönetici pozisyonlarda çalışan kadınların anne olduktan sonra işten ayrılmadan önceki dönemde daha alt pozisyona geçme ya da yönetsel sorumluluklarını bırakma gibi downshifting² deneyimlerini de ortaya koymaktadır. Örneğin, katılımcılardan birkaçı için yarı-zamanlı çalışmaya geçmek iş-yaşam dengesini kurabilmek adına geliştirilen bir strateji olarak ortaya çıkmıştır. Fakat, yönetici pozisyonda çalışan kişilerin deneyimleri yarı-zamanlı çalışmanın yönetici seviyesinde emeği sömürüye daha çok açık hale getirdiği için uygulanabilirliğini sorgulamıştır. Yönetici pozisyonunda yarı-zamanlı çalışan kişilerin gündüz çalışmadıkları süre, kontrol ve yönetme sorumlulukları olduğu için, onlara gece mesaisi olarak geri dönmüştür.

Ayrıca, araştırmaya katılanların iyi eğitilmiş, profesyonel meslek sahibi, çoğunlukla karar verme pozisyonlarında çalışan kadınlar olduğu ve bu nedenle daha yüksek sosyoekonomik statüye sahip bir gruba temsil ettikleri de belirtilmelidir. Bu nedenle, hane içi işlerde ve bakım işlerinde toplumsal cinsiyete dayalı işbölümü ve geleneksel toplumsal cinsiyet rollerine inandıkları ve bunların varlığını destekledikleri söylenemez. Çoğunlukla babaların çocuk bakım sürecine daha fazla dahil edilmesi gerektiğine inanmakla birlikte; sistemsal olarak bunun gerçekleşmeyeceğini düşündükleri ve var olan durumu değiştiremedikleri için kabullenme eğiliminde oldukları söylenebilir.

Bunlara ek olarak, COVID-19 salgınının getirdiği koşullar nedeniyle kadınların ücretsiz hane içi ve bakım emeğinin artmasına ilişkin bu çalışmadan ortaya çıkan bulgular, pandemi ile kadınların ücretsiz hane içi ve bakım emeğinin arttığını ve bu durumun kadın istihdamını olumsuz etkilediğini vurgulayan mevcut araştırmaları desteklemektedir.

Mevcut çalışmaların çoğunda olduğu gibi, bu çalışma da çeşitli sınırlamalara tabidir. Bu nedenle, bu çalışmanın sonuçları iki temel metodolojik sınırlılık ışığında değerlendirilmelidir. İlk olarak, bu çalışmanın belirli bir kadın grubunun deneyimlerine dayandığını belirtmek gerekir. Çalışmanın katılımcıları iyi eğitilmiş ve profesyonel meslek sahibi, ağırlıklı olarak karar verme pozisyonlarında çalışan—bu nedenle, daha yüksek sosyoekonomik statüye sahip bir gruba temsil eden kişilerdir.

² iyi maaşlı bir işi bırakıp daha az kazandıran ve stressiz bir işi tercih etmek

Dolayısıyla, profesyonel kadınların deneyimleri, farklı grupların deneyimleri için bir açıklama sağlayamaz. İkincisi, bu çalışma, küçük bir grup insanın deneyimine dair derinlemesine bir anlayış elde etmek amacıyla nitel araştırma hedefleri doğrultusunda kurgulanmıştır. Bu nedenle, bu araştırmanın küçük bir örnekleme dayalı olduğu dikkate alındığında, bu çalışmanın sonuçlarından genellemeler çıkarmak mümkün değildir.

Bu çalışmanın literatüre üç temel yönden katkı sağlaması beklenmektedir. İlk olarak, bu çalışmanın hedef kitlesi profesyonel kadın çalışanlar olarak seçilmiştir. Son yirmi yılda işten ayrılma literatürünün profesyonel kadınlar etrafında çoğalmasına rağmen (Williams vd., 2006: Stone, 2007: Jones, 2012: Orgad, 2019), Türkiye’de özellikle bu konuda yeterli araştırma bulunmamaktadır. Bu çalışma bu eksikliğe referans vermektedir. Türkiye’de bu konuda yapılmış bir çalışma olmaması nedeniyle, profesyonel ve yönetici pozisyonlarda çalışan kadınların anne olduktan sonra işten ayrılmalarına ilişkin nitel bir çalışma sunarak literatüre katkı sağlamayı amaçlamaktadır. Bu nedenle, bu çalışmanın birincil katkısı, belirli bir grubun—Türkiye’de erkek egemen bir sektörde çalıştıkları için azınlık olarak kabul edilebilecek profesyonel ve yönetici pozisyonlarda çalışan kadınların deneyimlerine ilişkin bulguları sunmaktır.

İkinci olarak, bu çalışma, hem kadınların istihdamına hem de anneliğe, yani annelerin ücretli işten ayrılmasına ilişkin toplumsal cinsiyete dayalı örüntüleri ortaya çıkarmaya odaklanmaktadır. Belirli bir grubun tam zamanlı anne olma yönündeki kişisel kararlarının bir sonucu olarak değerlendirilebilecek bu konu, aslında bir toplumsal cinsiyet eşitliği meselesidir. Bu nedenle, profesyonel çalışan kadınların anne olduktan sonra neden işten ayrıldıklarına ilişkin feminist kuramsal çerçeveye dayalı bir analiz sunması, bu çalışmanın beklenen bir diğer katkısıdır. Profesyonel meslek sahibi kadınların çocuklarına bakmak için kariyerlerini bıraktıkları bir seçim olarak ortaya çıkan işten ayrılma tartışması (Belkin, 2003), bunun bir seçim mi yoksa iş-yaşam çatışmasının bir sonucu mu olduğunun sorgulandığı çalışmalarla desteklenmiştir (Stone, 2007: Jones, 2012). Bu çalışmada, kadınların anne olduktan sonra kariyerlerini bırakmalarını kişisel bir tercih veya seçim olarak kabul etmenin, toplumsal cinsiyet ilişkilerini sorgulamadan kabul etmek anlamına geldiği gösterilmiştir. Kadınların kendi anlatılarından elde edilen bulgular, böyle bir işten ayrılma örüntüsünün

toplumsal olmaktan çok bireysel olduđu fikrine meydan okumaktadır. Burada, bir seçim eleştirisine dayanarak, annelerin kişisel tercihleri olarak varsayılan örüntülerin toplumsal cinsiyet ilişkilerinden ve sosyal olarak inşa edilmiş normlardan ayrı düşünölemeyeceđi vurgulanmaktadır. Bu çalışma, bu kadınların işlerinden ayrılmalarının sosyal, kültürel ve yapısal nedenlerine ışık tutarak, kişisel olanın politik olduđu şeklindeki birincil argümanını haklı çıkarmaktadır.

Son olarak, bu çalışmadan elde edilen dikkat çekici bir bulgu, profesyonel meslek sahibi kadınların hane içi işler ve bakım işleri konusunda iş atamasının zihinsel yükünü taşıdıkları yönündeki bulgu, feminist literatürde büyük ölçüde kullanılan kadınların çifte yükü veya ikinci vardiya kavramını (Hochschild & Machung, 1989) genişletecektir. Profesyonel meslek sahibi kadınlar söz konusu olduğunda, çoğunlukla hane içi işler ve bakım işlerinde profesyonel, ücretli destek alacak araçlara sahip oldukları için kadının hane içi ücretsiz emeđi zihinsel emek halini alabilir. Bu, hane içindeki toplumsal cinsiyete dayalı işbölümünün çeşitli biçimler alarak devam ettiđi anlamına gelir. Burada bir diđer dikkat çekici nokta, bu zihinsel yükün hem işten ayrılma nedeni hem de işten ayrılmanın bir sonucu olmasıdır. Kadınlar işten ayrılırlar da ayrılırlar da, bu zihinsel yükü taşıyacaklarını ve hane içi işler ve bakım işlerindeki iş atamasından sorumlu olacaklarını belirtmişlerdir. Dolayısıyla bu anneler için hem çalışıp hem de böyle bir zihinsel yükü taşımak yerine ücretli işi bırakmak daha stratejik bir seçenek olarak ortaya çıkmaktadır.

Kadının ücretli, ücretsiz ve bakım işi ve anneliđiyle ilgili meseleler, feminist tartışmanın ve ataerkil sisteme meydan okumanın merkezinde yer aldığından, kadınların anne olduktan sonra neden işten ayrıldığını anlamak son derece önemlidir. Bu çalışma, profesyonel meslek sahibi annelerin işten ayrılma konusunda yaşadıkları deneyimlerin anlatımına ilişkin feminist nitel bir analiz sunmaktadır. Bununla birlikte, bu çalışmanın temel odak noktası, belirli bir grup kadının deneyimleridir. Kadınların işten ayrılma kararına ilişkin daha kapsamlı bir anlayış elde etmek için, farklı kadın gruplarının işten ayrılma deneyimine ilişkin daha fazla araştırmaya ihtiyaç vardır. Örneđin, mavi yakalı çalışan kadın çalışanların anne olma ve işten ayrılma süreçlerini nasıl yaşadıkları daha sonraki araştırmalar için bir araştırma sorusu olabilir.

Ayrıca mevcut çalışma, annelerin işten ayrılma ve anneliği birincil kimlik olarak benimsemelerinin iş-yaşam çatışması ve işyerinde yıldırımaya yönelik bir strateji biçimi olarak karşımıza çıktığını göstermektedir. Kadınların, genel olarak ücretli ve ücretsiz hane içi işler ve bakım işlerinde karşılaştıkları sorunlarla başa çıkmak için geliştirdikleri çeşitli stratejilerin araştırılması önem arz etmektedir. Bu nedenle, bu tür stratejiler üzerine araştırmalar, gelecekteki çalışmalarda keşfedilecek yeni alanlar oluşturabilir.

Ayrıca bu çalışma, nitel bir çalışma olduğu için kadınların anne olduktan sonra işten ayrılmasına ilişkin genel bir veri ortaya koyamaması açısından sınırlılıklar içermektedir. Türkiye’de bu konuya ilişkin çalışmaların yokluğunda, farklı yöntemlere dayalı yeni araştırmalara ihtiyaç duyulmaktadır. Bu nedenle, karma yöntemler gibi farklı yöntemlerle yapılan araştırmalar, daha derinlemesine bulgular sağlama olasılığı ile mevcut literatüre katkıda bulunacaktır.

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