



**UNIONIZATION EXPERIENCES OF WOMEN, WOMEN POLICIES OF LABOR UNIONS**

RESEARCH REPORT

WOMEN'S SOLIDARITY FOUNDATION

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## Abbreviations

Birleşik Metal-İş	United Metal Workers Union
Birlik Sendikası	Unity Union
CLA	Collective Labor Agreement
Dev Sağlık-İş	Progressive Healthcare Workers Union
Dev Tekstil	Revolutionary Textile Workers Union
Dev Turizm-İş	Progressive Tourism Workers Union
DİSK	Confederation of Progressive Trade Unions of Turkey
Enerji-Sen	Energy Workers Union
Genel-İş	Public Service Employees Union
Gıda-İş	Food Industry Workers Union
Hak-İş	Hak-İş Trade Union Confederation
İmece	İmece Domestic Workers Union
Sosyal-İş	Social Security, Education, Office, Trade, Cooperative and Fine Arts Workers Union
Teachers' Union	Private Sector Teachers Union
TEHİS	Tourism, Entertainment and Service Industry Workers Union
Tez Koop-İş	Trade, Office, Education and Fine Arts Workers Union
TOMİS	All Automotive and Metal Workers Union
Türk-İş	Confederation of Turkish Trade Unions

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## 1. Introduction

Instead of the thesis that women in Turkey are the oppressed party in the relations of domination because they do not participate in production, it is more meaningful to argue that in Turkey women's status in production is very low and therefore even though they participate in production what they do is not considered economic activity because they are oppressed.<sup>1</sup>

The research we carried out on the waged labor of women towards the end of 2021<sup>2</sup>, left us with the question of the organization/unionization of women's labor and women workers. This question is based on a long-standing issue that has been on the agenda of both the feminist movement/women's movement and – to a certain extent – of the trade unions for quite a while now. The fact is that as a result of the consolidation of the neoliberal regime by the AKP (Justice and Development Party) from the 2000s on, we are living in an economic structure where the labor market has deteriorated and fragmented much further, the share of waged labor in the distribution [ of GDP] has gradually decreased<sup>3</sup> exacerbating class inequality, and the capacity to create employment opportunities has kept shrinking. While the severity of poverty coupled with the economic crisis that has been going on since 2018 and the Covid-19 pandemic has rendered millions of people unable to meet their basic needs, the incomes of wage earners, especially of the lower classes, have largely eroded in the face of ever-rising inflation, which keeps breaking new records.<sup>4</sup>

Turkey is one of the worst countries in terms of both workers' rights, their organization and unionization. According to July 2022 data, while the overall rate of unionization is 13.6 percent, the same rates for men and women are 15.21 and 9.67 percent respectively. To put it in numbers, there are only 503 thousand female union members compared to one million 530 thousand men.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, these data based on calculations which take only registered employees into account fail to reflect the real situation. The calculations made by the Confederation of Progressive Trade Unions of Turkey (DİSK), inclusive of non-registered workers, show that the number of non-unionized workers are much higher, hence the actual rate of unionization turning out to be much lower. The fact that women constitute a significant part of unregistered workers may give an idea of how unorganized women workers are.

<sup>1</sup> Ferhunde Özbay, "Kadınların Ev İçi ve Ev Dışı Uğraşlarındaki Değişme," *1980'ler Türkiye'sinde Kadın Bakış Açısından Kadınlar*, Der. Şirin Tekeli, İletişim yay., İstanbul, 2011, p. 121.

<sup>2</sup>Kadınlarla Dayanışma Vakfı (KADAV), *An Overview of Women's Employment & Labor Experiences*, İstanbul, 2022. <https://kadav.org.tr/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/1-KADINLARIN-I%CC%87STI%CC%87HDAM-VE-Emek-deneyimler-ine-bakii-2021-1.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> According to the estimates of the first quarter of 2022, Gross Domestic Product increased by 7.3 percent compared to the same quarter of the previous year. The share of labor in GDP dropped to 31.5 percent while the share of capital rose to 47.6 percent. The share of labor was 37 percent in the second quarter of 2020. Hence, the share that wage laborers/workers receive from growth is decreasing and the gap between classes is growing. DİSK-AR, Gelir Dağılımında Büyük Bozulma, 31 August 2022, <http://disk.org.tr/2022/08/gelir-dagiliminda-buyuk-bozulma/>

<sup>4</sup> A different picture emerges in terms of income and class difference when we look just at food inflation. For example while the food inflation felt in the poorest 20 percent income group is approximately 140 percent, the same ratio for the top income group is 70 percent. Average food inflation according to July 2022 data is 94.7 percent. DİSK-AR, Dar Gelirliğin Gıda Enflasyonu Yüzde 140'a Yaklaştı, 4 August 2022, <http://arastirma.disk.org.tr/?p=8976>

<sup>5</sup>Çalışma ve Sosyal Güvenlik Bakanlığı [Ministry of Labour and Social Security], Çalışma Hayatı İstatistikleri [Labour Statistics] 2021, , [https://www.csgeb.gov.tr/media/89862/calisma\\_hayati\\_2021.pdf](https://www.csgeb.gov.tr/media/89862/calisma_hayati_2021.pdf)

Another fact which makes the picture even worse is the level of workers' participation in collective labor agreements (CLA), in other words the issue of real unionization. CLA is a legal text between the worker and the employer which secures workers' wages as well as their social rights and interests and specifies the terms and conditions of work, and the mutual rights and interests of workers and employers.<sup>6</sup> On the basis of all wage earners, the CLA coverage rate is 9.5 percent in the public sector and 5.5 percent in the private sector. The ratio of workers who are currently union members but do not benefit from CLA is 28 percent.<sup>7</sup> The most important cause of this situation is the law itself, which regulates the activities of unions and how the authorization to make the CLA is attained. This law, which regulates economic activities on the basis of a total of 20 branches of activity, shuts out a very big part of the working class – also including informal, subcontracted and irregular workers – from organizing in unions as a result of the thresholds it enforces on branch of activity and workplace basis. According to the Law on Trade Unions and Collective Bargaining No. 6356, “the workers' trade union representing at least one percent of the workers engaged in a given branch of activity and more than half of the workers employed in the workplace and forty percent of the workers in the enterprise to covered by the collective labor agreement at the time of application for authorization shall be authorized to conclude a collective labor covering the workplace or enterprise in question.” Therefore, what we have before us is a legislation that leaves out many unions and union members, suppresses the labor movement and makes organizing extremely difficult.

While the legislation makes it difficult to beat the threshold, there also emerge differences on the basis of confederations. For example, 32 of the 33 unions affiliated to the Confederation of Turkish Trade Unions (Türk-İş), 17 of the 20 unions affiliated to the Hak-İş Trade Union Confederation (Hak-İş), and only 6 of the 21 unions from DİSK have managed to outdo the threshold.

The organization and unionization of women workers, on the other hand, involves many intertwined problems and obstacles that go beyond this current picture and legal obstacles. When it comes to women's paid work; a number of issues such as unpaid domestic labor, the concentration of waged labor in certain areas within the gendered labor market – that is, the distinction between women's work and men's work – wage inequality, low wages, informal work and gender discrimination in the workplace, sexual abuse and violence all come in a package. This comes as a result of patriarchal relations continuing to control women's labor in the labor market as well. The low-level of education provided for women and their deprivation of the necessary vocational training, their admission only to certain jobs and professions, the discriminatory and sexist practices in employment and at the workplace, the wage gap between men and women, and women having less job security because they are concentrated in jobs that are considered more “unskilled” and ultimately the continuing blindness of the unions to the overall picture, all lead to the “marginalization” of women's labor in the market.<sup>8</sup> Therefore, it should be emphasized that women's waged labor is configured along the lines of the market-patriarchy-state axis

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<sup>6</sup> Necla Akgökçe and Serap Güre, “Cinsiyetçilikten Arındırılmış Toplu Sözleşme Mümkün,” *Kadın İşçi Yayınları-Mor Seri*, 2021.

<sup>7</sup> DİSK-AR, *Salgın Döneminde Toplu İş Sözleşmesi Kapsamı Geriledi*, 21 April 2022.

<sup>8</sup> Yıldız Ecevit, “Kentsel Üretim Sürecinde Kadın Emeğinin Konumu ve Değişen Biçimleri,” *1980’ler Türkiye’sinde Kadın Bakış Açısından Kadınlar*, ed. Şirin Tekeli, İletişim, İstanbul, 5<sup>th</sup> edition, 2011, pp. 112-13.

and that the [male-dominated] unions, which are among the main addresses of labor organization, still fall short of responding adequately to this configuration and changing trends.

However, women workers continue to organize, to raise their voices against gender-based problems, to participate in resistances and to become members of unions, which we cannot claim embrace women. This is why we conducted a research focusing on the working and organizing experiences of women workers, based on the idea that labor-based organization of women should be considered together with capitalism, patriarchy and the present state of unionism. Based on women's perspectives and experiences, this study includes an analysis of women's problems related to paid work, their unionization and organizing tendencies, the present state of trade unions and their policies on women. Our study also puts forth questions on their political implications for the feminist movement/women's movement, and on how the struggle against patriarchy and capitalism can be strengthened.

## **2. On the Research: Objective, Method and Scope**

This study is based on in-depth interviews with 22 women (Annex 3) from 14 trade unions (Annex 2) organized in eight different branches of activity (Annex 1) between June and August 2022.<sup>9</sup> Public unions and labor unions being different from each other, we limited the scope of our study to labor unions. Our objective at the beginning of this study was to take a closer and comprehensive look at both the paid working conditions and the organizing and unionizing experiences of union member women workers; to see how far the unions have come in incorporating women and organizing women workers, and finally to think about how the issue of organizing women workers and labor is to be discussed in terms of women's movement and feminist politics. In this context, our priority was to reach women workers who are members of various unions in different branches of activity where women's presence is concentrated or limited. 16 of the women we interviewed were workers working in the branch of activity where their labor unions were organized. Most of these women workers were also actively involved in the executive bodies of their labor unions. The remaining six were unionist women who worked as experts in labor unions or, as in one example, held the position of branch chairperson. We reached a significant part of the participants using the snowball technique.

Undoubtedly, qualitative research carried out with a small group is not the kind of research that makes it possible to make generalizations. However, the most important feature of research based on the feminist method is that it provides us with information that we cannot see in mainstream macro-analysis and statistics. It makes it possible to see/hear women's issues from the perspective and in the words of the actors themselves, bases itself on the politics of experience and reveals the relationship of these experiences with structural systems. For instance, as the experience of a female worker who was sexually abused by the foreman in a factory, paid less than men, and employed as cheap labor, presents a cross-section of the relationship between patriarchy and capitalism, we conclude that this is an issue that concerns millions of women and that we need to develop policies to combat it. For this reason, this study does not only concern itself with the issue of presenting the results of this research but also tries, based on these results, to raise the question of what kind of a policy needs to be developed.

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<sup>9</sup> Six of these interviews were conducted online with participants from İstanbul, Ankara and İzmir, and 16 were made face to face in various counties of İstanbul.



To address some of the limitations of this study, we can say that we could not achieve a diversity of unions at the level of labor confederations. The study remained limited to DİSK unions (Birleşik Metal-İş, Sosyal-İş, Genel-İş, Gıda-İş, Dev Sağlık-İş, Enerji-Sen, Dev Turizm-İş) and independent unions (Birlik Sendikası, Dev Tekstil, İmece Domestic Workers Union, Private Sector Teachers' Union, TEHİS, TOMİS). We included the Tez-Koop-İş union affiliated to Türk-İş, not at the union administration level, but through the interviews we conducted independently with two union member woman workers.

One of the reasons we tried to diversify the labor unions was to take a closer look at the different unionization experiences, especially in branches of activity where women are concentrated. However, we did not receive positive responses—or any response—from many of the unions we asked to meet. A union affiliated to Hak-İş, from whom we were able to get a response and interviewed, requested to see the parts written about the union before the report was published. However, when they tried to interfere too much both in the content and our way of interpretation, wanted us to remove some parts even though there was no mistake of fact and made their taking part in the report conditional to this, we said we could not accept such an intervention and opted to remove our interview with the union from the report.

We should note that, aside from certain DİSK unions, independent unions were the unions that we could most easily contact and reach during the research. On this occasion, we had the opportunity to take a closer look at the independent unions that have risen in recent years and the organization of women within these unions.

We had a research process in which we mutually learned a lot from each other, as the interviews, which lasted an hour on average, included an exchange of ideas as well as a transfer of experience. Since it was not possible to use the real names of the women we interviewed in the report, we numbered the interviews in order to provide a certain standard (See Appendix 3).

We organized this report based on the narratives and experiences of women in five main sections on the basis of the following questions:

- What problems do women doing paid work face both as women and workers in different branches of activity?
- How do they struggle against these problems? What are the factors that enable or hinder their organization/unionization?
- What are unions doing for women? At what level is work related to women? What is the level of women's participation in trade unions?
- What are women's perspectives on present day trade unionism? Do they think it is effective in terms of both class struggle and women's struggle?
- What do they think about the relationship between feminist struggle and labor struggle? What are their suggestions concerning a common struggle?

### **3. Evaluation on Women's Paid Work**

According to Turkish Statistical Institute (TUIK-TurkStat) data, the rate of female employment is 26.3 percent. While the rate of men who work in part-time employment is 9.3 percent, the same for women

is 19.5 percent.<sup>10</sup> During the Covid-19 pandemic, women's unemployment increased and women endured more losses in employment. For instance, female employment was 28.3 percent before the pandemic. According to the DİSK report, with the impact of the pandemic, the working hours of more than half of the women decreased, 42 percent saw their wages decrease and women's broad unemployment (inactive labor force) went over 40 percent. During the pandemic, the greatest decline took place in the unregistered employment of women. The rate of women working informally decreased from 41.3 percent in 2019 to 35.5 percent in 2020. Informal work being most widespread among women, this data which theoretically seems to be positive under normal conditions actually indicates that informal workers are the most vulnerable group and that women are the ones who lost their jobs the most during the pandemic. In fact, the main reason for the decrease in women's employment is the decline in informal employment.<sup>11</sup>

The service sector leads the sectors in which women predominantly work. According to TurkStat, the total employment rate in this sector is 54.1 percent, the rate being 53.2 percent for men and 56.1 percent for women. In addition, while the rate of women working in the agricultural sector at 28 percent is still more than men (15.4 percent), the employment rate of women in the industry falls far behind men (31.4 percent) with 15.6 percent.<sup>12</sup>

The rate of women's participation in labor force in Turkey displays a trend that has been on the decline since the 1950s. For example, the rate of women's participation in labor force, which was 70 percent in 1955, dropped to 30 percent in 1996.<sup>13</sup> Undoubtedly, the most important reason for this is the disintegration of the rural area and migration, that is, the decrease in the ratio of women working as unpaid family workers in the agricultural sector and women starting to work in the service sector intensively as of the 2000s. For example, female employment in the service sector in cities increased by approximately 90 percent between 2005 and 2015. In time, women have turned into a mass of low-paid workers in small-scale businesses, mostly in jobs that are described as "women's work" and denoted as unskilled. According to 2013 data, 69 percent of women were employed in workplaces employing one to 24 workers.<sup>14</sup>

In this section, we will be looking at the working conditions, wages, men's work-women's work and the wage gap between men and women, and the unique problems of women workers in the eight branches of activity wherein the trade unions included in this study are organized.

### **3.1. Working Conditions and Wages**

The interviews we conducted with women working in eight branches of activity and in different jobs show that while working conditions vary by workplace, wages are generally low. Women made minimum wage or slightly higher regardless of whether they worked in markets, offices, office-based jobs in a municipality or as domestic workers. However, in certain factories, there were serious irregularities even

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<sup>10</sup> TÜİK, [İstatistiklerle Kadın 2021](#).

<sup>11</sup> DİSK-AR, *Covid-19 Döneminde Kadın İşgücünün Durumu*, 7 March 2021.

<sup>12</sup> TÜİK, *İstatistiklerle Kadın*, 2018.

<sup>13</sup> Gülay Toksöz and Seyhan Erdoğan, *Sendikacı Kadın Kimliği*, İmge Yayınları, İstanbul, 1998.

<sup>14</sup> Betül Urhan, *Sendikasıız Kadınlar Kadınsız Sendikalar*, KADAV, İstanbul, 2014.

in the payment of wages. For example, one of the biggest problems for a member of the All Automotive and Metal Workers' Union (TOMİS), who worked at the Sinbo factory –manufacturer of small household appliances– until she was fired on grounds of membership in the union, was the constant delay in the payment of her salaries and their being paid in four installments over two years. This factory had nearly doubled production without increasing the number of workers due to the increasing demand for small household appliances during the Covid-19 pandemic. Occupational accidents had increased and working conditions worsened with the advent of the pressure to increase production. For example, serious problems such as not sending workers suspected of having Covid-19 to hospital for testing and forcing them to continue working, non-compliance with hygiene rules, and not allowing women workers to use the toilet emerged. It is almost impossible to talk about an eight-hour day, especially in non-organized factories and workplaces.

In terms of working conditions, factories, markets, cafes/bars and houses are areas where working hours are longer and working conditions are worse compared to office jobs. It is known that working conditions deteriorated and working hours got longer in textiles, markets, food industry and hospitals, especially during the Covid-19 pandemic. An interviewee from Gıda-İş (Food Industry Workers Union) stated that their working times rose to 12 or even 14 hours during the Covid-19 pandemic because of the increase in time people spent at home and in the need for food. Just like food, textiles, where women are employed intensively and work in jobs that do not require "qualification"<sup>15</sup>, is normally a sector with very long working hours. As an interviewee who worked at the textile factory named SML Label reported, only white-collar workers were sent to work from home during the pandemic, while they were forced to work longer hours:

Our working conditions got tougher during the pandemic. While people were not allowed to go out on the street, we were forced to work all day with a single mask... When we raised this issue, we were told that it is the same in other factories; they said, buy yourself a mask. At that time, a mask was about five liras... During the pandemic, when no one was working they made us work 12 hours. Because the factories abroad in England and Germany were closed, their jobs came to us, as well. During the pandemic, in a period when we needed to pay more attention to our diet, they reduced the serving sizes of our meals. We used to have buffet meals and they turned them into takeaway packages of food. For example, when you asked for a salad, they said there wasn't any left, but they served salad to the white-collar employees, and to the management. (Interview Number: 3)

The interviewee from Dev Tekstil (Revolutionary Textile Workers Union) stated that one of the most important problems for women in the textile sector, along with many other problems, is the shift system, and that women's night shift work comes to the fore as a problem. For example, the Dev Tekstil member interviewee, who was expelled from SML Label for being unionized, explained how night shifts in factories render women more open to risks:

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<sup>15</sup> As pointed out by Anne Munro, "qualification" is a socially-defined concept and gender has always been decisive in this definition. The fact that the branches of activity wherein women are intensive are most often branches which, it is assumed, do not demand qualification is not independent of the sexism in the society. Anne Munro, "Kadınlar, İş ve Sendikalar," *Kadınlar ve Sendikalar*, ed. Eylem Ateş, trans. Hülya Osmanağaoğlu, Hava-İş, İstanbul, 2009.

The management broadcasted screams on the loudspeaker so that the women on the night shift would not fall asleep. The women were so scared... They even sat down and cried. Only women work on the night shifts. I was still working on the machine at 12 midnight. You can get your hand or arm caught up in the machine. Even a sudden appearance of the security guard would scare me. (Interview Number: 3)

Tourism and entertainment, on the other hand, is a sector in which short-term temporary employment is very common due to precarity, informal work, long working hours and low wages, as well as patterns of seasonal employment.

I worked informally for about two years. The sector does not prefer to employ insured workers, especially in cafes. Seven people worked at our workplace but they insured only one of us because they consider it an unnecessary burden. They insured that one person because they had to. It is said that about 900 thousand people work in the service sector but there in fact are one and a half million employees. Because most of them are unregistered. What is more, when you work, you can't just work as a barista. You also become a waiter or a dishwasher. You may also become a manager if need be. You have multiple job descriptions. You cannot work less than 10 hours in the service sector. In places that serve alcoholic beverages, you have to work at least 12 hours. Since I mostly worked in boutique places, I did not have a specific meal time. When a customer came, I would put my food aside and tend to the customer. (Interview No: 5)

Working for six months and going unemployed for six months is widespread in our sector, simple, menial jobs being informal. For example, it is very common for women from nearby villages to do cleaning work in small hotels in resort towns and they are entirely unregistered. (Interview Number: 21)

In the interviews we conducted with women who work in markets, offices and teach in private institutions, the common point was that their wages were quite low, at or slightly above the minimum wage, although the nature and conditions of their jobs were different. On the other hand, special attention needs to be paid to the situation of market and cafe/bar employees in terms of working conditions. While there is a division of labor among employees in relatively institutionalized market chains, there is no specific division of labor and job description in smaller branches. One interviewee, who was employed as a "store clerk", had to do all the various types of work related to the store –from cleaning to arranging the aisle– except that of the cashier. It was also common for a small number of people to be forced to do a lot of work because there always was a shortage of staff. Overtime was never paid, not even for working on public holidays. She even said that when she worked as a part-time employee in the market, her working time was almost 12 hours, she was paid below the minimum wage and she was not paid any overtime. Being forced to speed up production, denial of breaks, malnutrition, extreme workload and low wages make markets and stores the most difficult places to work.

In conjunction with their heavy working conditions and low wages, markets and stores are workplaces with high employee turnover. Interviewees working in markets stated that it is common for male employees to resign because they think they can get the minimum wage elsewhere or find a better job, while women have a tendency "not to resign, to hold out to the end, not lose a job they managed to get" (Interview No: 1).

Another professional group who, just like market employees, saw greater deterioration in their working conditions during the Covid-19 pandemic were teachers working in private institutions.

The conditions during the pandemic when we worked 7/24... there were lessons on the Zoom, there were supplementary lessons. I remember one thing... There was this lesson scheduled for 11 at night. Why? You are at home, you can give the lesson. But if it were a normal work day, you'd leave at seven o'clock. Or all parents and students have your phone number, they can text you a question in the middle of the night, send a message very early in the early morning. There also is something else underway there, they keep telling you, you are a teacher, don't let the child down, look, this is a sacred profession, a profession based on conscience, all you'll do is to answer a child's question that's all, don't let the child down... They manipulate the emotional issue a lot. (Interview Number: 22)

Education is an area that faced a most rapid deterioration as a result of neo-liberalization. As a result of the widespread privatization of education, the situation of teachers working in private institutions has long been identified with long working hours and low wages. Especially courses and private teaching institutions are places where precarity is at the highest level. The contracts are made in a way that does not cover the summer months and even very basic rights such as meeting the employees' food and travel expenses are not granted.

We have ten-month contracts at our workplace. I start working in September, and when the school closes in June, he says, bye-bye. Because I don't need you in the summer, he says, I won't sit around throwing away my money during summer. We sign our resignations in June by force; if we don't sign them, we face many threats. In September, he says, let's make a contract again. We end up in the same institution again... Of course, in that time in between, we have no insurance, no salary, nothing. Either you take a loan from the bank or you manage to survive somehow. (Interview Number: 22)

For women working in municipalities, one of the main problems is, not so much the working conditions and hours but the low wages. Three women working in the culture and education departments of Kadıköy Municipality said that they only received an 8% increase in their wages even though they are covered by the CLA, and because their union had not signed additional protocols they could no longer survive in the face of high inflation:

We have seen huge losses in our rights. Before the Decree changed our status from subcontracted workers to regular staff, we used to have minimum wage compensation. We are going through times when we have become very poor and cannot cope with this poverty, women workers in particular are going through very difficult times. We have actually been grumbling about this situation since November, this economic crisis in Turkey and we tried to push the union to do something about it. Unfortunately, they did not want to do anything. We demanded an additional protocol, it is essential because we are in very difficult conditions. The other day a woman friend of ours wrote: I was paying 1,700 liras for rent, the landlord evicted me, I am very hopeless, very unhappy, the cheapest rent anywhere is five thousand liras. And the money she gets is six thousand liras. We have a lot of woman comrades who have to work in second jobs. We have to do additional work. (Interview No: 13)

We did not get a wage increase, it has been two years since the collective labor agreement was concluded, and they made an eight percent increase in our wages. We didn't get a penny more. And of course, eight percent is a horrible figure in the face of this inflation. We're going on with that eight percent. Almost everyone is working for minimum wage right now. (Interview No: 15)

In the case of domestic workers, both their wages and working conditions are very bad. The most important problem for them is that the rate of unregistered work is very high, their work is not even considered a job and they receive low wages.

The job takes your whole day, but you don't get the money you deserve... When you work in a house, there is more pressure on you. I was very tired for a while. You get extremely tired of what you are doing, a piece of dust cloth in our hand all the time, detergents and people constantly demanding you to do this or that, unlimitedly. But you just try and make one demand and you will get rejected right away. Even women who are older than my mother go and do cleaning work. They work different hours each time, doing overtime. Not being able to get those overtimes, this is exactly what I'm experiencing. This is happening to me although I am insured. I don't get any overtime. I can put it before me [as a goal], but the uninsured cannot. (Interview Number: 8)

Interviewees who do domestic work pointed out that the situation of migrant domestic workers is much worse. Their passports are confiscated and they almost lead a prison life in the houses where they work. The laboratory technician we interviewed from the field of health stated that the working hours and conditions of public and university hospitals were better than private hospitals. Based on prior private sector experience she said that these have turned into places that exploit young women's labor in particular. She is one of those whose status changed from that of a subcontracted worker to regular staff with the last decree, but she is only receiving a salary of 5500 liras.

### **3.2. Gender-Based Employment Segregation and Gender Pay Gap**

The labor market in Turkey is divided along gender lines. This means that certain jobs are seen as women's jobs and others as men's. Firstly, women are often constricted to low-paying jobs, and this naturally creates income inequality between men and women. Statistically speaking, men earn 31.4 percent more than women. Secondly, it is very common for women to be paid less than men even if they do the same work. Income inequality between men and women wage earners is rising rather than shrinking. For example, the pay gap, which was 12 percent in 2006, rose to 20.7 percent in 2019.<sup>16</sup>

Among the branches of activity included in this study, metal and energy are the two with the sharpest distinction between men's work and women's work. Metal is a very male-dominant, old and conservative sector. Almost 90 percent of its workers are men. In this sector men work in the basic metal industry and automotive while women are mostly employed in the electronics sector in jobs such as gluing small parts, packaging, deburring, and quality control. A TOMİS (All Automotive and Metal Workers Union) member participant, who had worked in an electronics factory before, stated that women were mostly concentrated in the assembly department there.

Metal industry generally employs qualified personnel because it requires professional skills, however women have to learn the profession after they are employed because they are not given the opportunity to receive the same professional education as men. Moreover, while men are not even required to

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<sup>16</sup> DİSK-AR, Çalışma Yaşamında Gelire Dayalı Cinsiyet Eşitsizliği, 18 September 2020, <http://arastirma.disk.org.tr/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/%C3%BCcret-ve-gelirlerde-cinsiyet-e%C5%9Fitsizli%C4%9Fi.pdf>

graduate from high school, women are expected to have received higher education, according to one interviewee who is a specialist at Birleşik Metal-İş (United Metal Workers Union):

It was the first time a factory began to hire women workers. All of the women were university graduates whereas most of the men were high school graduates. In other words, while men with a high school diploma were doing most of the work, women are expected to be university graduates. With our encouragement, one of our factories started to recruit women for what had been an all-men's job all along. Nine women were employed. They're all four-year college graduates, but not graduates of relevant branches. Some were history teachers, some were economists. In other words, they need to be much more qualified or much more educated in order to get the job as a woman. Yet another factory, a very old and well-established factory, began to hire female workers for the first time. Even women forklift operators came out of that place, they received forklift training etc. All of them have either a master's degree or a bachelor's degree. But I have known that factory for years, there are old workers who've been there for years, you can find high school graduates or middle school dropouts among them. Or vocational high school graduates. Male workers are secondary school dropouts or high school graduates. But women do not receive vocational training. That training comes later in working life. In other words, women do not get trained to become welders in vocational high schools. Sexist education still continues to be very dominant in those places. (Interview No: 7)

It is very important that women are entering male-dominated branches of activity with the pressure of a labor union, that is of organized power. On the other hand, this shows that women are accepted in an almost all-male sector to the extent that they meet some criteria that actually are not related to the nature of the job. Energy, too, is a sector where predominantly men work and a limited number of women are employed in certain jobs, that is, the distinction between women's work and men's work is very clear. According to a participant who works as a specialist in the organization at Enerji-Sen (Energy Workers Union), women are generally employed in meter reading and billing. There are a limited number of engineers and secretaries among employed women. The narrative below shows how rigidly the distinction between men's and women's work continues in the sector:

Even I tried to get a job. AYEDAŞ [Istanbul Anatolian Side Electricity Distribution Company] you may know, the electricity company on the Anatolian side, I applied for a job there, I filled out the form. They told me, we work in the electricity sector, we work in a heavy industry sector, we do not hire women, you can apply to work as a secretary. I applied to İSKİ [Istanbul Water and Sewerage Administration] ... Supposedly almost fifty percent of the meter readings done by women have been turning out to be wrong – a lie, town talk – so they have cut down on employing women, that is to say, they were not employing women. They said, you can work in consulting, or you can work as a secretary in human resources. (Interview Number: 17)

This interviewee told us about a female union member, who also works as an engineer. This woman resigned as a result of mobbing when her director said, "You are a woman, you will be kicked out on grounds of code 25 – of immorality, and you will never be able to get a job again." Therefore, there is an established gender-based distinction and discrimination in branches of activity such as metal and energy, beginning during recruitment and going on at work itself.

On the other hand, in the tourism sector where women work in relatively high numbers compared to these two sectors, there also is a gender-based division of labor and a wage gap. In places where the Dev

Turizm-İş (Progressive Tourism Workers Union) is organized, women are mainly employed as floor attendants and room cleaners under a category named housekeeping. Also, although it is women who work in the kitchens of hotels and similar facilities, “it is men who usually are at the top of the hierarchy.” (Interview No: 21). For example, while men are listed as kitchen coordinators, chefs, and assistant chefs, women’s status is generally that of assistant cook. This difference between men and women in terms of status directly determines wages, women are already concentrated in positions with lower wages. This discrimination, which already begins at the stage of recruitment, constricts women to positions like receptionists and baristas, where the workers are visible and need to be “presentable”. An interviewee working in a cafe/bar also mentioned cases where women are preferred more as “images”. According to her, all businesses in the entertainment sector want to employ women on the pretext that customers want to deal with women employees because they are “more polite and understanding”. Business managers, on the other hand, are usually men and women file up in the lower ranks of the hierarchy. In cases where men and women do the same job (cooking, for instance) it is common for women to be paid less.

Health, on the other hand, is a branch of activity in which women constitute the majority, both in Turkey and in the world in general. 70% of healthcare workers worldwide and 56% in Turkey are women.<sup>17</sup> Our interview with a healthcare worker who is a member of Dev Sağlık-İş (Progressive Healthcare Workers Union), shows us that men have created a hierarchy in certain jobs and that sexism begins already at the stage of recruitment even in a women-intensive sector.

When I applied for a job in the Red Crescent, when I talked to them, there was a shortage like crazy. There was a lab shortage. They told me, we don't employ women. I said why don't you employ women? Because one of these days you will get married, – the language is incredible, by the way, the jargon is terrible – your husband will say don't work, and rightly you will not work. Therefore, we will have trained you instead of training someone else. They said, you will go on and bear a child tomorrow, and when you give birth that also is a problem for us. As women, we have to bear children, and because we have children, we in turn have to stay away from production. They also show that under the cover, they show a woman's place so beautifully... [they say] you have no place in production, in fact you can work only as much as your husband tells you to. That perception is an incredibly scary perception. Many similar things have taken place. For example, the 9 Eylül University Hospital where I currently work... the director in charge of the department himself called a newly married laboratory assistant and asked, "You will not have children the first six months, right?" How can I describe that pressure? It's about your having kids, so their hands reach out even to your bed. Likewise, when I began to work at 9 Eylül University, I also was asked directly: Are you married, single, are you engaged, do you plan to get married soon, will you have children soon? This was the second place where I was asked these questions directly. You are eliminated directly because you are a woman in other places, that's something else. Such things are proof that there is severe gender discrimination against women. (Interview Number: 20).

This interviewee stated that she did not observe a gender pay gap between people doing the same job in public and university hospitals. She said they would not be able to do something like this anyway. But

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<sup>17</sup> Çağla Ünlütürk Ulutaş, “Pandemi Döneminde Kadın Sağlık Çalışanları,” *KEİG Platformu*, 2021. <http://www.keig.org/pandemi-doneminde-kadin-saglik-calisanlari/>



she had the following to say about how the existing gender inequality was able to govern the pay difference by various means:

Imagine two cleaning staff doing the same job. One is a woman and the other a man. They do the same job, but the man can do more overtime than the woman. He can be called in to work at any time. The woman cannot do this. The woman has housework, she has children, she has this, she has that. She also has various responsibilities outside of work. While the woman can come in twice, the man can fill in all gaps. Therefore, at the end of the month, the man ends up earning more. There are other things as well. For example, he also gets the risk ratio. For instance, women cannot work in the waste collection center. Because women can't work there, men do the work. There is a risk ratio. Men benefit more from the risk ratio. Also, there are ports who carry, bring and take away patients in the operating room. The risk ratio is high when transporting Covid patients. But the woman worker who cleans up the area where Covid patients are cared for or cleans up the places where they stay does not get that risk ratio. There are things like this, but they do not do them overtly, conspicuously but like this. (Interview Number: 20)

Weaving, Ready-made Garment and Leather, on the other hand, is a sector in which mostly women – and increasingly immigrants and refugees – work, which does not generally require “qualification”, therefore low wages, precarity, informal work and poor working conditions come as a package. A Dev Tekstil (Revolutionary Textile Workers Union) member interviewee who worked in SML Label until she was fired because she became a union member stated that women mostly worked at the machines, in the production department, but jobs such as machine maintenance and repair in their factory were dumped on them as well and they received lower wages than men:

We do the same job, we cannot get the same pay and have to work for lower wages just because we are women. Or women get to be the ones dismissed. They see women as supplementary workforce. Even though we did the same jobs and took care of the same machines, they paid male workers a thousand liras more. (Interview Number: 3)

On the other hand, as we mentioned in our previous study, textile is one of the branches of activity in which women are mostly involved as informal workers. Contract manufacturing, piecework at home, unlicensed workshops have now become a natural part of this area. Some of the jobs in the factory mentioned in the above quote (SML Label), such as tying ribbons and strings, were given out to women at home as piecework, and many women were employed outside the factory without insurance and for low wages.

A sector like Trade, Office, Education and Fine Arts with over four million employees, great many sub-categories, and including employees from different professions working in the same workplace is the largest sector. It includes many professions such as market/store and office workers, lawyers, software developers, doctors, assistant pharmacists and private teachers. According to our interviewees, who were women workers and/or women in the executive bodies of four unions (Sosyal-İş, Tez Koop-İş, Birlik Sendikası, Özel Sektör Öğretmenleri Sendikası (Private Sector Teachers' Union) organized in this sector, women are generally concentrated in accounting and office jobs, markets and stores. A significant portion of private teachers also consists of women.

In terms of the distribution of work by gender, there is an inconspicuous distinction in the markets that causes a difference in terms of wages. Generally, everyone works for minimum wage in the markets. An

interviewee working in the market told us that the majority of cashiers are women, but that the wages are slightly higher in aisles that require some professional knowledge (for example, cake-bread, fish-meat-butcher) and that mostly men are employed there.

Again, in the private education sector, where wages are at the minimum wage level, sexism emerges both in expectations from women and in the pay gap between men and women. Firstly, there is a sexism that emerges directly sometimes, and in more “subtle” forms at other times:

We are naturally identified with motherhood because we are women and we are asked to pay more attention to the child. To coddle the child, deal with his/her special problems, etc., but the same is not expected of male teachers. They demand extra emotional labor from us. Or, when assigning regular classroom teaching (class master) duties, they assign male teachers one class while they assign us two or three classes. Because we are also given the role of a caretaker there. Or we can provide guidance to the child when s/he has a problem, etc., but when it comes to promotion, if one is to be the assistant director or the coordinator, men are chosen, why? Because “men are more disciplined, more authoritative”. In fact, your field is blocked as well, you get less impact even though you work harder. Our struggle is not only with the boss, but also with our fellow teachers. For example, if tea or coffee is to be made or some visitors are expected, who makes the coffee, the female teacher prepares the coffee, who prepares the table there, the female teacher prepares it. The man does not even touch his hand, the female teacher even cleans his garbage. (Interview Number: 22)

Secondly, female teachers are expected not to dress “revealingly” in front of students, but to be “presentable” when it comes to dealing with the parents, to wear heels and make-up. Usually, women teachers are sent to welcome the parents. This sexist discrimination also becomes apparent in the determination of wages. Alongside being assigned responsibilities different from those of men while carrying out their jobs, it is also possible that women are seen as weaker at the “bargaining” table.

There is a huge difference in wages between men and women. First of all, you do not have a general, established wage because it is the private sector. You get what you hang on to at the bargaining table. They can manipulate women easily. They build their argument on something like, what will you do with it anyway? If you're a single woman, you don't stand a chance, you'll start with minimum wage. But if you're a man, they build it on “a man has needs”. And because it is more difficult to manipulate men, they can be more headstrong at that table. And because they see the man to be more authoritative and more, I don't know what... It depends on how you promote yourself. Here is what usually happens: now, teachers will agree on a pay above the minimum wage, but when the minimum wage changes in January, our salary will not change. For example, let's say you reached an agreement on six thousand 500 liras, which is above the minimum wage now, but if the minimum wage becomes seven thousand liras in January, you continue with your seven thousand liras. (Interview Number: 22)

Public Services, on the other hand, is a branch of activity with many subcategories. In large housing estates where the Genel-İş (Public Services Employees Union) is organized, it is seen that women are concentrated partly in the office section, but mostly in the cleaning unit. In municipalities, while female employment has increased in recent years, women with relatively higher levels of education generally work as office personnel, and women are also concentrated in park and garden works and in the cleaning department.

### 3.3. Occupational Diseases and Risks

Among the women we interviewed, it was factory, market and domestic workers who talked the most about occupational diseases and work accidents. While female workers working in electronics and textile factories frequently encountered problems such as nerve compression, waist and neck hernia due to heavier working conditions, they had also been in situations where measures not taken led to loss of limbs and even death in their factories. There was an interviewee who, before starting to work in markets, had come around the risk of blindness when she got a side cutter in her eye while working in an electronics factory in the organized industrial zone. Glasses and gloves, which had not been provided for the workers because they were costly, were only provided after this accident. Another female worker, who had worked at the Sinbo factory, talked about how capital puts workers at risk to reduce costs and the results of this as follows:

The work women do is heavier. For example, in other departments such as injection, there are operations like collecting parts and arranging. But in our assembly department where the management either does not take any precautions or does not make the necessary arrangements because of its cost, there is too much pressure at the pneumatic screwdriver or at the point of joining the burry steel products. Because of this, dozens of women have nerve compression in their wrists. In such cases, people are not even allowed to go to the hospital. Women who came down with occupational diseases were quitting their jobs as a last resort and embarking on surgical operations. There are two losses here. Not only does it end up not being registered, not being qualified as an occupational disease, but they also use it as a means of mobbing, making those workers to give up their right to compensation and back out of the field of employment. Nerve compression is something that affects a person's life in a very horrible way. You become unable to work. Because you are not permitted to go to the hospital, you lose the opportunity to get timely treatment. It reaches an advanced stage. In addition to that, constantly standing in the same way under the pressure of speed and performance – in such a way that there is no humane adjustment made even in the sizes and dimensions of the table or the chair. In other words, a state where you give up your humanity and turn into a robot, hernia of the neck, hernia of the back, as well as varicose veins all over the legs are widespread. I was assigned to a department where I was using a pneumatic screwdriver. My shoulders ached from the strain. Safety sensors were being canceled to speed up the machine. So, both products turned out faulty and work accidents could not be prevented because the sensors that were supposed to prevent work accidents were turned off. They do this to cut costs and increase production. (Interview No: 2).

Health problems experienced by market workers vary. One of the reasons for this, as we mentioned earlier, is that the branches of most chain stores are of different sizes. In big stores, there is a certain division of labor, while in others, everyone is responsible for all jobs. The interviewee, who has been working as a cashier in a large-scale supermarket for many years, said severe pains began in their arms due to the pressure to work fast, such that in time they could not lift even a light load, and that they experienced hand tremors.

I have a pain in my arm. I did not go to the occupational diseases' hospital, I went to a normal hospital. They said it was on account of my profession. Because we always lift heavy stuff. We are always told to be fast. Many of our friends developed pains in their arms over time because we do the job by ourselves. We get sudden pains in our arms out of the blue. We can't lift heavy

things. Even when I carry just one or two kilos of stuff, my arm is immediately exhausted as if I were carrying five kilos. There is pain afterwards, my hands tremble when I put the product down. I have to rest my hand. This problem shows up in most of us after a few years. (Interview No: 4)

Another interviewee, working in a smaller branch of the same market chain, said that she had herniated discs in the neck and in the waist due to heavy lifting, had shortness of breath and asthma due to exposure to too much dust. Personnel shortage and pressure for speed gave rise to occupational accidents when carrying heavy products, heavy lifting led to incidents of bleeding in women and even miscarriage in pregnant women:

We lift heavy stuff. I know of times when a ton of watermelons came. I unloaded them because there were no men. Because there is a forklift, our body adapts itself after a while, but it is not the same. I could even have lost my ovaries. And our menstruations are irregular. You can't get pregnant, the miscarriage rate is high. I had a work accident at the market at that time as well. When I tried to lift a parcel quickly, my back snapped. (Interview No: 1)

It is very widespread for domestic workers to be heavily exposed to chemicals because of the cleaning materials. The three domestic workers we interviewed had been doing housework for 13, 20 and 25 years, respectively. One's knees and shoulders were in such bad shape that she had to get constant injections. In her own words "her lungs were filled with chemicals" after many years of exposure to cleaning materials." (Interview No: 10). Domestic working is a job that exhausts and wears out the body and causes permanent diseases when done for many years.

This is a work that wears the body out. It's a profession that is very much prone to diseases. Feet go, hands go. My knuckles and fingers are distorted. The day after work, I walk like a penguin. My body hurts. I feel as if they whipped my body throughout the night. My whole body hurts. Because it is another struggle with the germs there. Whether you wear a mask and gloves or not, you get germs. Plus, those chemicals know no bounds, neither masks nor gloves. Believe me, gloves lose shape, they stick on your hand, I throw them away, imagine what the chemicals are doing to my body. (Interview Number: 8)

It has also been stated that women who are housekeepers and cleaners in the tourism and entertainment branch of activity also commonly experience such ailments due to the intensive use of detergents:

There is the problem of chemicals which especially our friends working in cleaning are exposed to. When you mix those cleaning materials, gases and the like are emitted, when they are mixed there is exposure to chemicals. A relative of mine got cancer because of this. A woman, a young woman, got lung cancer because of the chemicals in the cleaning materials. This was very clearly stated by her doctor. Apart from this, occupational diseases such as neck and lumbar hernia and nerve compressions are very widespread in our sector as a result of lifting and pulling heavy loads while cleaning. (Interview Number: 21)

Occupational diseases continue to be an issue that is emphasized the least, that even the labor unions have not put on their agenda. Many interviewees said that İSG (Occupational Health and Safety Council) specialists were brought to the workplace only for show, that in case of getting ill or having an accident at the workplace they had to wage a struggle to prepare a written report and official record of what

actually happened. They were also exposed to mobbing and threats of dismissal when they prepared that official record.

### **3.4. Harassment/Sexual Abuse, Sexism and Mobbing**

Since neoliberalism is based entirely on flexibilization and precaritization, it has undoubtedly been able to establish itself through the exploitation of the labor of all workers regardless of gender. However, as the gender distribution of jobs and wage inequality have also shown above, capital uses and nurtures gender inequality and sexist ideology for its own benefit.<sup>18</sup> This is why women workers experience many intertwined forms of discrimination and pressure in paid work. Hence, women's paid work experiences are different from men's as a consequence of the continuing existence of patriarchal relations in the field of paid work. Sexual abuse by foremen, managers and male workers in factories; sometimes by male managers, often by customers in stores, hotels, markets, cafes and bars; by male employers in domestic work; by parents in education is very widespread. This has been one of the common problems raised in all our interviews.

As can be seen below, it should be noted that women working in workplaces with high customer circulation such as markets/stores and cafes/bars are more exposed to abuse, especially by male customers:

There is a constant issue of abuse here. Customers would come and push us to a corner. In between the aisles, where the camera could not see they would ask for our phone numbers. There was this associate professor. He was obsessed with me. He looked down upon me because I was of lower status. When I rejected him, he said, how can you reject me? He came on me, tried to abuse me. I pushed him off. All this is happening in the store. These are the conditions we work in. Those waiting at the door in their cars... We couldn't stand it anymore. We were five women working there. We would take our pepper sprays with us. A man came and asked my friend, what is your price? (Interview No: 1)

I've been abused innumerable times in this sector. You face mobbing every second. The way a male customer treats a male employee is not the same as the way he treats a female employee. They have a more abusive, more casual attitude towards female employees. They may seek you out in social media and harass you with texts. Bosses may do this too. (Interview No: 5)

Many similar experiences were related by women workers working in this field. The situation was such that in such cases managers generally did not attempt to solve these problems, and even if they did, the measures were insufficient and women were left face to face with the reply that "the customer is always right". The fact that women who are sexually abused have to keep encountering the abusive customers normalizes male violence and abuse as well, putting women at greater risk:

The same customer could keep coming to the store, and when we reacted to this, we heard words like, she is at fault too. In fact, we had come face to face with the abuser. For example, obsessive types would come. But the management did nothing about this. The customer is always right! (Interview No: 1)

We had a friend who was being constantly abused by a customer. She told the chief about this, the store manager, for example. The man was placing orders by phone. They blocked this man's number; they found such a solution. Then, this old guy did not behave, he dug his heels in. He wrote to our headquarters.

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<sup>18</sup> Feryal Saygılıgil, *Bir Kadın Grevi: Serbest Bölgede Kadın Olmak*, Güldünya yay., İstanbul, 2018.

When the headquarters heard about this, they said how can you treat our customers like this, and implementing the customer is always right policy, they removed the block on his number. They told us that he could come and shop in our store as he wishes. They just prevented him from getting in contact with our friend who was abused. Someone else was going to answer the old man's phone calls. But he could come in as a customer, and our friend would see that person; and when she is abused, our friend's only reaction is not to respond. Having seen all this, we can't say anything. The customer is always right policy operates. All this bears very heavily on us. We face abuse, there is constant abuse. The abuse by an incoming customer within a minute is not a situation that you will not find yourself in again, it is a constant situation and in spite of this, no solution is found. Because, the staff, unfortunately, has no value in the workplace. (Interview No: 4)

It is very common for women to either quit their jobs upon abuse or to encounter more pressure and mobbing because they raise their voice against abuse, or to decline from exposing this situation for fear of losing their jobs. The market employee, whom we quoted above, said that resignations due to abuse and violence is very common in the sector. Members of the Birlik Sendikası (Unity Union) stated that it is widespread among teachers working in private sector to quit their jobs if they are abused. A domestic worker we interviewed stated that she quits in cases where the abuse is not "explicit" but she felt unsafe. It should be noted here that the workplace of domestic workers being the house, puts them at greater risk in terms of abuse.

The experiences of a TOMİS (All Automotive and Metal Workers Union) member woman worker who had worked in an electronics factory previously, show how sexism, mobbing and precarity, as well as their effects on organization, are intertwined:

There is systematic abuse, especially of young women. It is the foremen and managers who make these abuses. For example, if a woman comrade raises her voice when she is abused, she is given more work, is subjected to more mobbing and pressure, and that woman becomes the target of all male foremen, and they are successful. They subject that woman to mobbing and pressure all together. Women cannot but resign within a month, they are forced to. Sinbo [factory] did not send anyone away with compensation while I was working there. In general, they were forced to resign through mobbing, oppression, and systematic abuse... One of the conditions that undermined our struggle in Sinbo was the state of constant circulation. It is an environment where especially young women workers cannot stand for a long time, and middle-aged women remain silent not to lose their jobs regardless of the conditions. Our members were mostly young people, but this circulation hindered union activity. (Interview No: 2)

Another reported experience is about a woman working in the meter reading and billing department in the energy branch of activity. She was sexually abused, and she defended herself against it and reported it to the workplace, but still wanted to change her department and was afraid of being fired. The fear of being fired from work in a textile factory, the similar anxiety of women working as housekeepers and cleaners in hotels, and the clothing criteria imposed on women, show how precarity, sexism, mobbing, and abuse are intertwined:

Our woman comrade was recently abused. While she was reading the meter, the owner of the house where she read the meter came out, he was drunk and grabbing the woman by the arm tried to pull her inside the house. The woman smashed her reading device in his face and fled. She reported this to her workplace and filed a complaint, but all they did was to fine the man. The man hadn't paid his water and

gas bills anyway, he already had fines. They said, nothing will come out of it even if you file a complaint. The woman applied for a secretarial job inside, and she said, give me a desk job. I told the woman, we can file a complaint with the police etc. She said, I do not have any problems with the union, I know you can understand me, but I am married, I have a three-year-old daughter, and if my job is terminated, I cannot make a living at this time, I have no insurance. (Interview Number: 17)

There was a divorced woman with children. The white-collared, those in the administration wing kept telling her, let's be lovers, come to our division, let's not get married, let's just hang out. When we said let's all raise a collective voice, our friend said, I need the job. We said let's all gather and raise our voice as women, but our friend had this fear of being fired. (Interview No: 2)

Abuse is widespread in the sector. For example, our floor attendant friends suffer severe abuse by both customers and male employees. Women's inability to disclose this for fear of losing her job is something we witness a lot. Mobbing and pressure are experienced widely. It is very common for our colleagues working in the more visible places to be forced to be presentable, to use make-up, and to abide by certain criteria on clothing. (Interview Number: 21)

In the case of the energy worker, the situation is quite positive in terms of the abused woman reporting the situation to her workplace and union, but in some cases, we are also confronted with the problem of women not "seeing" what they suffer as abuse.

Another form of sexist discrimination emerges behind women's fear of being fired. Because of the men at home or because of the age limit in many workplaces, women can be pushed into not speaking up against abuse and poor working conditions in order not to lose their jobs:

We had a hard time convincing the women that what was done there was abuse. An atmosphere as such was created, both pressure and fear of unemployment and most women being above a certain age limit. Now there is an age limit of 35 years in factories. Because of that there is a situation whereby she endures this situation, takes that abuse for granted and sees it as legitimate. When I showed that it was abuse, she would try to drop the subject, saying no, it's not abuse. But we have taken many steps in fighting abuse, both exposing and filing complaints, and in the internal fight against it. (Interview No: 2)

There is one thing that all the women workers told us, if I quit [the people at home] they may not let me work elsewhere again, here I have won the freedom to work. And the age issue of women has also been an important problem before us for a few years now. They concede to all poor conditions after the age of 45. They are forced to. They say if I leave here, no other place will take me. Because all places want young and dynamic workers, especially in the case of women. All of these are circumstances that keep women back from working life and employment, disrupt work peace, and turn working life into enslavement. This is true for all workers as well, but it is like this, especially for women. (Interview No: 18)

The age limit shows that precarity takes on a new form when it comes to women. Because this means being unemployed after a certain age and hence not being able to retire. As a woman textile worker put it, "not employing women after the age of 35 while the retirement age is 62" (Interview No: 3) is a discrimination that excludes women from employment and hinders their retirement.<sup>19</sup> Age discrimination is also an obstacle before women finding a better job. A 57-year-old domestic worker

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<sup>19</sup> Women's span of service is much behind men's. While women with a span of service of 16 years and over is 12.9 per cent that of men is 23.6 percent. DİSK-AR, Türkiye'de kadın işçi gerçeği, 2018. <http://arastirma.disk.org.tr/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/Turkiye-isci-sinifi-gorunumu-Toplumsal-Cinsiyet.pdf>

looked for another job due to the heavy exhaustion and fatigue caused by domestic work, but could not find one because of her age. The statement of a woman working in the cleaning unit of a housing estate, "If the employer hears that I am 60 years old, he will fire me" (Interview No: 6) shows that women have to struggle even to remain in paid working life.

Also, even though mobbing is a type of pressure and discrimination that men, too, suffer in connection with hierarchy in the workplace, it affects women more harshly because of the patriarchal relations and inequality of power which continue in the workplaces just like everywhere else. This is especially true in workplaces where men are concentrated. For example, this is how an interviewee who worked in an electronics factory before beginning to work in markets expressed how women workers can easily be treated in ways that male workers are not.

We were four women working in the factory and we were exposed to mobbing by both the male employees and the foreman. The friends who were more exposed to mobbing were younger than me... When I turned my back to cut the cable, the foreman would mess with the work the women did, without them seeing it just to win the director's favor. When it passed through the machine like that, women would be subjected to mobbing by the director. The foreman did this because he wanted to rise. The director was constantly calling women, saying why don't you do your job properly, we will fire you. (Interview No: 1)

This female worker had suffered a severe workplace accident as a result of being forced to do more than one job at the same time, even the work normally done by men, and precautions were not taken. Later, when she started to work in markets, she continued to be subjected to mobbing again. When she objected to mobbing and worked to organize against it, she was subjected to more pressure and mobbing and was forced to resign.

#### **4. Struggle against Labor Exploitation, Harassment and Mobbing: Organization and Unionization of Women Workers**

As we have seen, harassment, violence, mobbing and labor exploitation at the workplace are very important problems that further derange the paid work area, in which women already have a small share and have as much difficulty entering as staying. We have partially talked about what women workers do or have to do in the face of these problems in general. As we have mentioned, keeping silent for fear of quitting or losing the job is a common situation observed by almost all interviewees. This, of course, applies even more to non-organized and non-unionized female workers who are not engaged in any collective struggle.

Just as women feel stronger and get results when they act collectively against male violence and abuse in daily life, this is also true in workplaces. Because it has become a compulsory part of work for women to fight against labor exploitation, low wages, mobbing and abuse. The fact that it is difficult to fight alone leads women to seek collective organization. In the words of some interviewees, "everyone is looking for a way out" and the way often leads to unions in this search.



#### 4.1. Why union? Which union?

Both the union law itself, and the attempts of the government and the capital to try to prevent the organization of labor and unionization and the fact that membership in DİSK unions and independent unions has almost become a crime, with membership in them being cited as reason for dismissal in itself, all make it difficult to organize. Secondly, the restructuring of the economy on a global scale since the 1970s, the serious change and deregulation of the labor-capital-space relationship as we know it with the advent of neoliberalism, the spread of atypical forms of employment as a result of work becoming flexible especially among immigrants, women and young people, and the precarity of these labor groups<sup>20</sup>; in other words the inadequacy of classical unions in coming up with satisfying responses to the changing and stratifying structure of the class have been among the factors that weakened unionization.

However, the only factor that makes it difficult for women to unionize is not the political conditions and the nature of the economy at the macro level; but there also is the factor of labor unions acting in harmony with the macro structure that marginalizes women in the labor market. The unions, which were established to protect and further the interests of workers against bosses, have historically been bureaucratic structures that organize male workers and whose foundations, therefore, rest on male domination. For this reason, it was not easy for women to be accepted in the unions.<sup>21</sup> However, with the more massive participation of women in the labor market since the 1970s and the pressure of women on the unions, the number of female members of the unions increased in many countries and important steps were taken regarding gender equality in the unions. For example, in England, it can be seen that efforts are being made to recruit especially women and young people. The Union Equality Contract for Women of the TUC (Trades Union Congress) in 1979 is one such example. Along with this agreement, liberal measures such as childcare assistance, monitoring gender equality, and training for women were taken, as well as radical measures such as reserved seats for women in administrative bodies and trade union delegations, proportional representation, women's conferences, women's committees, and quotas. By 1980, the rate of unionization of women had increased to 40 percent. Separate women's organization within the unions in England has become so widespread that as of 2000, women's structures were formed in 13 of the 27 unions.<sup>22</sup>

There have been developments in the unionization of women in other countries too. However, Turkey continued to be one of the countries with the lowest rate of unionization among women and the highest gender gap in labor unions.<sup>23</sup> Undoubtedly, there were some relative improvements, but especially the classical unions continued to be bodies in which bureaucratic structures based on patriarchy maintained a strong existence. Therefore, in view of the fact that women's work is more precarious and unregistered in the labor market, that it is concentrated in areas that are difficult to organize, and considering the

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<sup>20</sup> Kadın Emeği ve İstihdamı Girişimi (KEİG), Çalışma Yaşamında Eğretilik, Eğreti İstihdam ve Atipik İstihdam ilişkisi, İstanbul, 2015.

<sup>21</sup> Necla Akgökçe, "Sendikalarda Kadınlar," *Feminist Bellek*, 2022. <https://feministbellek.org/sendikada-kadinlar/>

<sup>22</sup> Gill Kirton, "Kadınları Sendikacı Yapmak," *Kadınlar ve Sendikalar*, ed. Eylem Ateş, trans. Hülya Osmanağaoğlu, Hava-İş, İstanbul, 2009.

<sup>23</sup> Alongside Turkey, countries like Argentina, Austria, Bangladesh, Germany and Greece are examples where women's rate of unionization is the lowest and the gap between women and men in unions is the highest. Jelle Visser, "Can unions revitalize themselves?" *The International Journal of Labour Research*, 9 (1-2), 2019, 17-48.

political pressures on unionization, the ongoing patriarchal structures of unions altogether, for women not only working but also unionizing and existing in unions becomes a matter of struggle and determination in itself.

It is exactly for this reason that, in this section, we commence with the question of how the unionized/unionist women we interviewed are organized and unionized. In general, being a member of a union can mean better wages and working conditions, as well as various social benefits if the union has passed the threshold and received CLA authorization. Otherwise, as one interviewee put it, workers would have to settle for a “mere minimum wage” and work without bargaining power against the boss. Therefore, one of the main motivations for unionization may be to ensure that labor rights are secured against employers, and that social and economic interests are protected. In addition to economic interests, as observed by the interviewee working as an organization specialist at Birleşik Metal-İş (United Metal Workers Union), the problems that women experience on the basis of gender discrimination in the workplace have recently become reasons for organizing:

The problem that generally pushes women to organize is economic difficulties. We cannot say that unions have much appeal for women. The unions do not have a policy that addresses, invites women. While economic difficulties give rise to a desire to organize, it is through workers who have contacts with the union convincing other workers that we reach the union. Recently, the number of women in search of unions to improve their working conditions has increased. The idea of organizing becomes part of women’s agenda also because they are abused. Women have engaged in a quest even if on a small scale. (Interview No: 7)

While organizing is more likely in big workplaces or factories, there is the fact that a significant proportion of women work in small and non-organized workplaces<sup>24</sup>, often informally. For example, while it is already difficult for domestic workers to organize because their workplaces are houses, even proving that the domestic worker is a worker was a struggle in itself for the Imece Domestic Workers Union.

It is very difficult to organize because we do not work in factories where workers work collectively, because we work alone in houses. We sought out women one by one and began to explain what a union was. At seven in the morning, we opened stands in front of villas trying to communicate with women. We got on municipal buses and tried to explain what a union is, that a domestic worker is a worker. [We thought that] If we could convince women that they were domestic workers, they would organize and join the union. We reached these stages through struggle. Through struggle, we learned that housework is work and that a domestic worker is a worker. We did not know that beforehand, and we did not accept it. We thought that we were doing the same job in our own homes anyway and we would be working for a fee, it seemed to be an advantage for us. But over time, we have seen that they can fire us whenever they want. We realized that s/he is the boss and that we are the workers. (Interview No: 10)

We cannot say that all the women workers we interviewed look at unionization solely on the basis of wage unionism. Some had become members of DİSK unions because they believed that DİSK unions were still pursuing a revolutionary class struggle despite all their shortcomings. For them, this was the

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<sup>24</sup> According to 2013 data, 65 per cent of all workers and 69 per cent of women workers are employed in workplaces which have 1 to 24 employees. This is something which makes it more difficult to organize. (Urhan, *ibid.*, p. 21)

path to acting together, organizing, and establishing class solidarity. For some, it was better for their membership dues to go to DİSK instead of a yellow union, but apart from that, DİSK was "not much different from the others". Although two Tez Koop-İş members did not find the union close to them in terms of its stance, it was the union that was authorized in the markets they worked in and they had to become members of the union in order to benefit from certain rights. However, the struggle they waged in the workplace went far beyond the union.

It is necessary to point out a different situation regarding independent unions. All of the women we interviewed from the independent unions were both workers in the branch of activity where their unions are organized and they were also founding members, co-spokespersons, general secretaries, or held various positions in the executive bodies of their unions. Almost all of them were already organized in various left/socialist groups and some had ties to the women's movement. In fact, these unions were generally founded by workers working in the branch of activity in which they were organized. For this reason, the circumstances were different situation in terms of representation, interest and sense of belonging. They came forward with statements like "the word, the authority and the decision rests with the worker" – of course, many DİSK unions also adopt this - workers work in all their executive bodies, every worker is considered an executive, the workers are the owners of this field of activity, and they uphold independent and class unionism. They organized workers from the non-organized areas left out by the classical unions, such as motor couriers, domestic workers, musicians, private sector teachers, pharmacist assistants, etc., and they expressed that they took on struggle not only for their own members but for all workers. They also reached out to workers who were not their members through grassroots organizing, committees, and commissions. This is important in terms of enabling informal workers to get in contact with unions, especially in the services sector where unregistered work is high.

In fact, independent unions emerged in reaction to the mentality of classical unionism and its way of running the unions. The women workers we interviewed had become members of or had taken part in the establishment of independent unions with the idea that the classical unions –including most of the DİSK unions– were unsuccessful both in organizing workers/women workers and in waging the effective class struggle. For example, a woman worker from Dev Tekstil (Revolutionary Textile Workers Union) said, "We felt the need to become the member of an alternative union as a result of DİSK's policies. I wanted to be a member of an independent union that engaged in revolutionary class unionism." The interviewee, one of the founders of TEHİS (Tourism, Entertainment and Service Workers Union), believed that they were waging a struggle that went beyond unionism as we know it:

I don't mean all unions, but because of the yellow unionism situation... Before TEHİS, I became the member of another union for a short time, DİSK's Dev-Turizm İş (Progressive Tourism Workers Union). But I mean, how can I put it, no one contacted me. Maybe it had something to do with me. Let it not seem like blaming the union directly. There still are friends there whom we get together with in trade union struggle, but [we wanted] to establish an alternative union. We are not a classical union. Since we were founded, people around us have been commenting on how young we are. We really are, because we are young people actively working in the sector, we can [put our finger on] our own troubles much more easily. We founded this at the end of 2020 (...) We said from the outset that we will not be a classical union and classical unionists. There is a co-spokesperson system from the very beginning, there is no presidency. I and a male comrade are co-spokespersons of the union (...) As we stated in our founding

declaration, we are people who have been in the Gezi [resistance]. We are people who have been there and have learned a lot from there. Me and many of our female friends are already actively involved in women's struggle. It is impossible for us to be so versatile and yet be a classical union. Unfortunately, most unions are men's unions. Unions where our brothers and uncles go in their suits. That's why we try to be a young and active union, a union as dynamic as possible (...) In other words, we are not a team that opens the office in the morning and sits there until the evening. We are still actively working in the sector and at the same time waging a labor union struggle. In fact, we are running around for ourselves and other friends. (Interview No: 5)

TEHİS gives priority to commissions (motor couriers, students, migrant workers, women, etc.) and workplace committees in organizing. Since unregistered work is very high in this sector and unregistered workers cannot become union members, they include the workers who are not their members in the organization through commissions. Recently, they organized the musician actions and the Yemek Sepeti resistance and motor couriers.

Most of the independent unions continued to organize using ways and means such as direct action and resistance, grassroots organizations, trainings that would raise class consciousness among the workers, workplace committees, bulletins. These unions, with the exception of İmece, were established after 2015, and their members and executives were as young as the unions themselves. For example, the women workers we interviewed were predominantly in their twenties or thirties. Except for the Öğretmenler Sendikası (Teachers' Union), which has around 2,200 members, and the Birlik Sendikası (Unity Union), which has 836 members, they were also small in terms of membership, their numbers ranged between 25 and 186. None of them are unions that have passed the threshold and received CLA authorization. They were already criticizing the idea that sees class struggle only as a matter of CLA and wages. While trying to increase the number of their members, their ultimate goal was not to obtain CLA authorization, but rather to follow a continuous line of independent class unionism. For the interviewee from the Özel Sektör Öğretmenleri Sendikası (Private Sector Teachers' Union):

We are trying to increase our membership, but to increase members is, well, a matter of inspiring confidence in friends, fear in enemies. In fact, we are not doing badly at all, it hasn't even been a year, we now have close to three thousand members. It is going very well. The CLA process is very far from us, and we are not in a situation where we work relying on CLA. As I said, for us the more correct method is one where we fight the boss rather than come to terms with him at the table. But if a CLA comes, why should we say no? But right now, we are not aiming for one. And the thing is, the problem is, when you set your target to be the CLA, you create hopelessness in the workers as long as your membership does not exceed that one percent. (Interview Number: 22)

For example, TEHİS stated that they did not wait to sign a CLA to achieve certain gains and that they signed protocols with workplaces to protect the rights of workers. Also, TOMİS (All Automotive and Metal Workers Union) stated that although it is a union with a small membership, it supports the "de facto and legitimate" struggle of the workers even without the CLA authorization and that they have achieved gains against practices such as unpaid leave as a result of actions and resistances.

Although they did not have CLA authority, being a union member gave strength to the women in these unions. For example, a domestic worker started to see herself as a worker after she became a union

member. And she continued her membership in the union despite her husband's reaction. For yet another domestic worker, unionism was not to be thought of only in terms of economic benefit, because it gave a sense of organization and strength:

Proceeding with my colleagues in the union contributed a lot to me and I was aware of this. Most people do not know the good that the union will do for them. When we tell them about the union, most people ask if it will give them anything financially. Even if it does not help financially, what you call a union raises awareness. I am aware that it is important to be unionized and walk with your colleagues. (Interview Number: 8)

It is possible to talk about the outcomes of unionization such as, not signing the contracts imposed, resisting being forced to resign, and taking collective action in cases of abuse and mobbing.

#### 4.2. Direct Action and Resistance

How do women deal with problems like abuse and mobbing alongside labor exploitation when they unionize and organize? How do they get results from these struggles? In the last few years, we have witnessed the rise of workers' protests and resistances all over Turkey. According to the report of the Labor Studies Association, 1,480 individual worker and civil servant actions were reported in the press in 2021. In particular, there is a significant increase in the number of workplace-based actions compared to the previous year. However, the proportion of workplace-based actions in which the number of women is equal to or greater than men dropped from 33 percent in 2020 to 28 percent in 2021.<sup>25</sup>

The fact that this rate is low in general cannot be considered independently of the level and quality of women's employment, as well as the policies of the unions. As a matter of fact, it is seen that women are more in number and at the forefront in the actions carried out in the healthcare, textile, public services and accommodation branches of activity, that is, in the branches of activity where women work intensively.<sup>26</sup> When women workers resist, they raise their voices not only against the attack on their union rights, wages and working conditions, but also against gender discrimination. From the Novamed Strike and Desa Resistance in the mid-2000s to Flormar in the 2010s to the more recent resistances like SML Label, Alpin Çorap, İndomie Adkoturk, Acarsoy Tekstil, ETF Tekstil, Amazon Turkey, Salcomp Xiomi, Technomix, etc., which women took part in or led rising in many places it is possible to see the different dimensions of the discrimination against women workers. For this very reason, the statement of a woman worker from Indomie AdkoTurk, "We rise against the husband at home and against the boss at the factory"<sup>27</sup> is very important to understand the resistance of women workers. As we have seen in some of these resistances, women are paid less than men, are exposed to harassment and mobbing, work under inhuman conditions, and are not allowed to take breaks even to change pads.<sup>28</sup> In some cases, women workers have also exposed the capital that makes gender equality PR material. For

<sup>25</sup> Emek Çalışmaları Topluluğu, İşçi Sınıfı Eylemleri Raporu 2021, <https://emekcalisma.org/>

<sup>26</sup> Ebru Işıklı, "Kadın işçiler her şeye rağmen direndiler," *Kadın İşçi*, 23 August 2022. <https://www.kadinisci.org/guncel/emek-calismalari-toplulugu-raporunda-kadinlar-kadin-isciler-her-seye-ragmen-dir-endiler/>

<sup>27</sup> Roza Kahya, "Evde kocaya, fabrikada patrona başkaldırıyoruz!," *Kadın İşçi*, 16 November 2021. <https://www.kadinisci.org/orgutlenme-sendika/evde-kocaya-fabrikada-patrona-baskaldiriyoruz/>

<sup>28</sup> For women workers stories of organizing, unionization and resistance you can go to the organization/union page of *Kadın İşçi*. <https://www.kadinisci.org/orgutlenme-sendika/>

example, when the workers organized in the Birleşik Metal-İş (United Metal Workers Union) launched a resistance at the Farplas factory, which sells itself off as a "women-friendly company" and whose owner is among the "50 Most Powerful Women in Turkey", they made public the fact that this factory does not have a daycare center, it makes pregnant women do heavy work, pays men more even though they do the same job and does not allow women even to go to the toilet.<sup>29</sup>

While it is common to remain silent in the face of problems with a fear of losing one's job, as we mentioned before, in the context of this study there also are many examples where women object to and encourage other women, thus generating an awareness of the organization. One of the interviewees, who worked in an electronics factory before she was unionized, had raised her voice against the harsh working conditions and labor exploitation at the workplace and had tried to organize other workers as well. In response, the management increased its pressure and mobbing on her and took various measures to prevent her from organizing the workers. The departments in which she worked were constantly changed and, in her own words, she was "exiled" from department to department. However, this did not discourage her, and as a result, a woman's solidarity emerged:

Since my class consciousness developed during the period I worked, I was familiar with the struggle, but I had not seen the class in the practical field. (...) I said to the foreman, you are mobbing women. I said, you go for anyone's labor here, and just as we were going to fight tooth and nail, people intervened. I yelled a lot, the factory rang with my voice. All of a sudden, the foreman attempted to hit me. When I snapped, who are you to hit me, people intervened. From then on, the foreman could not lay hands on any woman again. Women also came to my side and started to stand by me at the slightest problem. They said thank you, we did not know, we were not aware of it. And the whole thing gave them courage. They said yes, we face mobbing here. When they realized this, they started to come up with answers. Our circumstances there became completely different. (Interview No: 1)

Because of the systematic abuse experienced in the market where the same woman worker later worked –mentioned in the third section– and the failure of the directors and even of the union to take any effective measures concerning this, women workers began to seek solutions. All they knew was that if they, as women, could give an organized response, the abuse would end.

We came up with a response to the abuses. I was a workplace representative. The director was talking behind our backs, he said, you have no proof, there is nothing I can do. But we all said we had been abused. Women wanted to resign because of the abuse. What more proof? Of course, we were enraged. I told my women friends, we have to solve this by means of our own self-organization. For, we were being blamed at the same time. We said, if you do not solve this problem, we will go on strike. Ultimately, women were the ones who solved the problem. We gave [the abusive customer] a beating there. But I couldn't beat him myself, it remains an unfulfilled desire for me. We said, we will beat him, not anyone from outside. Nobody could say a word. Because an organization had taken shape there. If it were just one person, she would be fired. All the women there came for him. The director told him [the abuser], "Don't come here again." We got exactly what we wanted. The man did not come again. (...) Women feel worse when we don't solve our own problems ourselves, when, again, a man intervenes. All of the women who

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<sup>29</sup> Fatmagül, Güliz, Ece Zelal, Başak, "Farplas'ı ve direnişi kadın işçiler anlatıyor," *Çatlak Zemin*, 2 March 2022. <https://catlaczemin.com/farplasi-ve-direnisi-kadin-isciler-anlatiyor/>

had said they would resign said we succeeded. We're not going anywhere and we exist. A really extreme self-confidence took over. (Interview No: 1)

This interviewee, who was fired along with many other unionized workers on pretexts of "downsizing" while working at CarrefourSA, later took part in the front lines of the CarrefourSA resistance. They effectively had a large part of the society hear about the exploitation of labor, pressure, mobbing, violence, and abuse they experienced at the markets.

It is possible to say that direct actions and resistances are widespread among independent unions too. The resistances are important as examples wherein women participate heavily, even take place at the forefront of some. These unions are able to turn the presence of women members in the unions more active by means of direct-action strategies they pursue, as well as being more open to women's participation, at least of those within the scope of this study. For example, for an interviewee from the Teachers' Union, who was still at the beginning of her career, the workplace had become a place where she would "not be exploited but where she would struggle and fight" (Interview No: 22). One of the most widespread actions this union carried out was the "institution raids", in which women heavily participated.

The top executives [in the union] are mostly men, but when you go down to the grassroots, I see that the women friends are more courageous. First of all, women constitute the majority of the sector. Our famous activities are institution raids. We raided a lot of institutions and got very good reactions. For example, April 23, May 19, these are public holidays, but they make teachers work, make them go in classes, or they make them work during the snow breaks, during the fifteen [day-half year] breaks. Then we go and raid the institutions. When we raid the institutions, we women trade unionists make more noise. We fight one-to-one with the bosses. Our male friends usually stay calmer, they approach saying we can talk and stuff. Of course, I don't say this in terms of taking a step back, but we are more vociferous there. Because we take out that fury, which stems from the pressure that society imposes on us, from the male boss in front of us. We are more courageous in this regard, our female friends come to the meetings and demand to take on more duties. (Interview Number: 22)

It was one of the observations of some of the interviewees that women workers were becoming more open in sharing the abuses they encountered with their unions and seeking solutions. For example, the general secretary of the Gıda-İş Union stated that in recent years women workers had made more mention of the abuse and mobbing they experienced and put it down as a point of order.

These abuse and mobbing issues have been discussed more openly in recent years. Previously, women had an attitude of hiding it. They used to refrain from talking about it, but now they openly express both to us and by means of petitions to the human resources departments of the departments they work in, that they are being mobbed and abused. What has caught my attention is that they state it clearly. (Interview No: 18)

Four women workers, who were dismissed from the Acarsoy Tekstil factory because they became union members and who took up resistance, publicly exposed not only the poor working conditions and pressure, but also the sexual abuse, insult and mobbing that had become systematic in the factory.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Bahar Gök, "Acarsoy Tekstil'in direnişçi kadınları dimdik ayakta: Biz bütün kadınların sesi olduk artık," *Kadın İşçi*, 26 April 2022.

Therefore, as many interviewees have stated, “Women are oppressed more in the workplace” and they are becoming increasingly vocal about it. For example, the employees at the SML Label factory initially got into unions, opposing the very low wages and exploitation of labor, and 22 people, some of whom were members of DİSK Tekstil and others of Dev Tekstil, were dismissed. However, in this factory, women were paid less than men, were subject to more abuse and mobbing by the foremen, and they made women do more work. For this reason, when organizing the SML Label resistance, Dev Tekstil also brought up these problems that women workers suffered. The union also put forward demands such as equal pay for equal work and daycare centers.

A similar situation existed at the Sinbo Factory as well. As a result of circumstances such as work accidents and work murders, unpaid leaves, and salaries being paid late and in installments, some workers in this factory started to organize in TOMİS. They voiced their demands by means of long-lasting actions and resistance as well as legal processes. When their being put on unpaid leave was found unjustified, they came back to work, but pressure increased, especially on women. Because the most active division in terms of organization in the factory was the assembly department where female workers were predominant.

They forced us to work in isolation from all workers. We rejected this. Then they tried to compromise. They placed the three male friends into their division. Actually, we were their target, because we were very effective in the division where women worked. Our breaks, toilets, meal times were separate from all workers’. They did not leave us a time where we could reach out to those women. We went in the morning and started talking to all the workers we could reach in the assembly division. We decided to put a problem before us every day. I was fired on grounds of Code-29 a month later. They dismissed me citing the pretext of, worker acting against the rules of morality and goodwill. (Interview No: 2)

Then they engaged in resistance against Code-29. This concerned women in particular because being fired on grounds of the “morality” code confronted women with a different risk both in paid work and in the family and society:

Article 22/5 of Code-29 is an article that has the potential to affect workers, especially women workers very much. Because there is no gender equality in Turkey, women workers behave more hesitantly to avoid (being accused of) immorality. In Turkey it is very difficult explain this at home, to her family and relatives. Many workers who do not file lawsuits cannot find jobs because their work record gets tarnished. I couldn't find a job for a year and a half either, I've just got one. We have struggled a lot, especially as women workers. As a union we carried out an action in which we chained ourselves in front of the Social Security Institution (SGK). (...) This struggle lasted for a year and at the end of a year they revoked Code-29, but they had played with words. They replaced Code-29, with five articles. It was pretty much the same thing. We organized marches point by point in many cities to completely get rid of this article, we said we are going to Ankara. Almost every day, we were detained in these marches in cities. (Interview No: 2)

In short, when women workers unionize and organize, they resist both patriarchy and capital, the objections of other women encourage them, and their demands expand to include gender equality.



#### 4.3. Barriers to Women's Unionization

While resistances and direct action strengthen the collective struggle of women workers, it is another issue for women to join the unions, to be included in the organizing process in the unions and to be able to keep this up. Because organizing is not just about direct action but requires a more systematic, long-term process. It is a fact that women have the acumen to continue to participate in unions, resistances and actions, and to press the unions in spite of the general trade union tendency, which we cannot say opens its doors to women on the one hand, and the patriarchal relations that obstruct women in every field on the other. One of the most important things that this study showed us was that women were determined to organize and fight, whether working in a factory or in a private educational institution.

However, there are too many factors that obstruct this or restrict it. First of all, the services sector, where women's employment is intensive, is a highly fragmented field, with high circulation, small-scale workplaces, and high informality, and is therefore difficult to organize. Secondly, in connection with this, it is a fundamental problem that the classical unions, which traditionally tend to organize in large-scale workplaces in the industrial sector, cannot respond to the changes in the labor market, that is, they cannot establish models and organizational lines suitable for the new class.<sup>31</sup> Therefore, newly developing forms of employment, especially informal jobs where women are concentrated, are still far from being an issue for which classical unionism develops policies.<sup>32</sup> Thirdly, and most importantly in the context of patriarchal relations, is the fact that women work double time. In order for women to participate actively in organizing activities, domestic work and care duty load needs to be shared equally. But this is nearly impossible as all unpaid domestic work is on women's shoulders. As Urhan stated, being active in the administration and activities of the union on top of working both for wage and working at home, can turn into a "third working day."<sup>33</sup>

Therefore, even in the case of unionization, there are obstacles to women's participation in organizing and decision-making mechanisms because of the patriarchal structure of the unions. In Turkey, the headquarters and branches of the unions are predominantly male, most of the unions still do not have women's structures such as women's commissions. The length of meeting hours and domestic work make it impossible for women to participate in various activities. The fact that the problems that also shape women's experience in paid work such as abuse and various discriminations do not find a place in the statutes as sanctions or are not included in training programs obstruct women's active presence in the unions.<sup>34</sup>

As emphasized by almost all the women we interviewed, domestic chores, the burden of care duty and the pressure of men at home remain one of the biggest obstacles to women's active participation in the organizing processes, no matter how eager they are:

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<sup>31</sup> Urhan, *ibid*, p. 64

<sup>32</sup> Toksöz ve Erdoğan, *ibid*, p. 70

<sup>33</sup> Urhan, *ibid*, p. 11

<sup>34</sup> Eylem Ateş, "Kadınlar ve Sendikalar," *Kadınlar ve Sendikalar*, ed. Eylem Ateş, trans. Hülya Osmanağaoğlu, Hava-İş, İstanbul, 2009.

Why are more women coming? Because women are exploited more, women need unity more in this area. As women, we learned better: to be united, to be in solidarity, to be organized. Since women's struggle is on the rise, because women are familiar with it, women come better. Women are more vocal, more courageous because we are learning to fight against male violence as well. That's why we can directly address the boss. Also, our women friends come and demand to take on more tasks, they demand to participate in more activities, but there are cases when they cannot stay late because of society. (Interview Number: 22)

In Sinbo, during our work stoppage actions, men did not stop work in the departments where men work many times, but we always carried out our work stoppage actions as women in the departments where we work. We got our demands through the actions of women, and of course, our male friends also benefited from these gains. (...) However, the exploitation of women at home is an obstacle before their organizing. When we have a meeting or training program, there are women who, due to their husbands' pressure, have to go home and cook or tend to their children. Our current life routine is a major obstacle before the organization of women. During the pandemic, we carried out our training on Zoom, but it was difficult for women to participate even when they were at home. We planned the training programs according to the times of our women friends. Not only their husbands, but even their sons were also able to prevent them from participating. (Interview No: 2).

Many reasons, such as domestic work and family caregiving burden, pressure from men at home (for example, it is common for husbands to have their e-state passwords), the desire to use the remaining one day for other needs after six days of work, do not leave women any space for organizing and weaken their relations with the union. Women often cannot attend the meetings of the unions. Therefore, it is necessary to discuss paid work and the organization of labor in the context of how to transform sexist and patriarchal relations in the home:

Involving women in the struggle and enabling them to undertake tasks in the trade union struggle is not just about saying they should undertake tasks. We cannot solve it without talking about gender equality. Equal sharing of household chores, that's the main issue. You cannot get service from a woman who is exhausted. It is out of the question for a woman who is exhausted by child care, exhausted by the care of the house, exhausted by the care of her family members and the elderly, to come and carry out some other activity in the union. Not realistic. (...) Having work waiting for me when I go home at night makes me quite uneasy, reduces my performance, prevents me from writing, drawing and reading. Sometimes there are too many tasks one coming on top another, you have to go home from the meeting at 11 in the night and continue again at 7 in the morning. These are very challenging things. We also travel to many other cities. For women, these trips may not always be very enjoyable. My kids have grown a bit, of course, but you still manage the house while you're there. There is something that I have witnessed a lot in our male friends, they come dressed very stylishly. They dress neatly. I even once told a chairman that he dressed very stylishly. He thanked his wife in front of me. In other words, there definitely are women who take care of their backs, do their chores at home, and make sure that they can comfortably give those speeches in these places. They never think about the care of the children, the food... For example, when we ask women friends to undertake a responsibility in the union or as a delegate, she says she can't deal with it. She says, I have children and I don't have any time. Or when we say, there is a two-day training session here, let's go together, she says, I have no time. Because they work six days a week and one day remains. (Interview No: 18)

One of the most important issues revealed by the feminist movement is the fact that men confiscate women's labor in the home, that this gives rise to an exploitation and that women's paid labor cannot be separated from unpaid labor. The issue of organization cannot be considered independently of women's unpaid/invisible labor. Therefore, a discussion on the organization of women workers cannot be carried out ignoring facts such as unpaid domestic labor, family caregiving burden, and the pressure of men at home. At this point, it is important to ask what the unions are doing for women and to continue to raise this question persistently.

## **5. Gender Equality Approach and Women Policies of Trade Unions**

The fact that both paid and unpaid work of women is so loaded with exploitation, problems and contradictions, problems based on gender discrimination in workplaces, powerful persistence of patriarchal relations in workplaces as well, and women workers' pursuit for a way out in the face of these problems naturally once again raises the question "What are unions doing for women?". We see that the specific problems and demands of women workers began to show up in the agenda of labor unions in Turkey partially in the nineties, but gained momentum mostly in the 2000s. Some factors affecting this can be listed as changes in the international arena, such as membership in international labor unions and the mainstreaming of the issue of gender equality, the rise of the women's movement/feminist movement, and the process of harmonization with the European Union. For example, the establishment of the Women Workers Bureau within Türk-İş Confederation is based on its cooperation with the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU) in 1979.<sup>35</sup> However, Türk-İş, whose administration consists entirely of men, has neither a women's structure nor articles about women in its statutes. There only is a Women Workers section under the Training Department.

Hak-İş Confederation, on the other hand, has a Central Women's Committee. This Committee is a body which is included in this statute, works at the central level and reports to the executive board. It was created pursuant to the amendment of the statute at the 12th General Assembly in 2011. Therefore, it has a relatively institutionalized structure, but it often comes to the fore with rhetoric and policies along the lines of the government. For example, it emphasizes the rhetoric "strong society, strong family" and endorses neoliberal practices such as flexicurity.<sup>36</sup> A confederation following such a line has come to establish a women's committee under the influence of factors such as its membership in international trade unions, developments in gender equality in the international arena, and the rising trend of project writing with the EU harmonization process. For example, according to Urhan's study, 25 EU projects were carried out within Hak-İş and one of every two projects carried out each year was implemented by the Women's Committee. Therefore, there is a line here that can be called "civil society unionism".<sup>37</sup>

DİSK states that it aims to "achieve the unity and solidarity of all workers in their workplaces, branches of activity, at national and international levels, on the basis of gender equality, regardless of race, gender, belief, religion, sect, language and thought" in its statute. It has a Board of Women Representatives and a Women's Bureau among its bureaus of specialization. However, in the statute of DİSK updated in the 16<sup>th</sup> General Assembly convened in 2020, there is no mention of a women's commission or women's

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<sup>35</sup> Urhan, *ibid*

<sup>36</sup> Urhan, *ibid*, p. 40

<sup>37</sup> Urhan, *ibid*, p. 38.

committee to be established by the statute. Work related to women is carried out through a de facto women's commission where the women executives and women specialists of the member unions come together.

Looking at the last 20 years, it is seen that there have been some important developments on a union by union basis. The publication of the Petrol-İş Women's Magazine by the Petrol-İş Union (the Petroleum, Chemical and Rubber Workers Union) in 2003, the acceptance of the principle that "woman's statement constitutes the basis" in crimes against women in some unions, and the addition of articles about women to the CLA can be cited as examples of some developments. In the context of domestic violence, there is the work women from the Kurdish women's movement have carried out in municipalities. For example, the CLA signed between Leyla Güven, the Mayor of Seyhan, Küçükdikili Municipality, and the Genel-İş Union (Public Service Employees Union) in 2005 had an article ruling that half of the wage of a union member who perpetrated violence against his wife would be given to the woman who was subjected to violence.<sup>38</sup>

At the international level, in 2019, the International Labor Organization (ILO) constituted Convention 190 on Violence and Harassment, the first international convention on harassment and violence in the workplace, which entered into force in 2021. This agreement is now on the agenda of the confederations and it is demanded that it be accepted by Turkey.

In this study, one of our main focuses when meeting with the unions was how the unions approached gender equality and women's unique problems, and whether they engaged in any tangible work concerning women. Only four of the 14 unions have a women's structure (commission or committee), these unions are: DİSK's Bırselik Metal-İş (United Metal Workers Union) and Sosyal-İş (Social Security, Education, Office, Trade, Cooperative and Fine Arts Workers Union), and the independent unions TEHİS (Tourism, Entertainment and Service Industry Workers Union) and Private Sector Teachers Union. Since there are differences in perspective and operation between independent unions and unions affiliated to confederations as we mentioned above, in this section, we will examine the unions separating them accordingly.

### **5.1. Independent Unions**

Among the independent unions, there are two unions that have both a stance on women in terms of their statutes and have women's commissions: Teachers' Union and TEHİS. In other unions, we see that articles about women or the approach to gender equality are included in the statute. While TOMİS (All Automotive and Metal Workers Union) states that it will struggle "against approaches that consider women to be the secondary sex", Dev Tekstil (Revolutionary Textile Workers Union) includes in its statute the article that "it takes the necessary steps to ensure that all workers and laborers, especially its members, participate in the struggle for the elimination of the historical and social oppression of women. It engages in educational activities in this regard". However, there are no specially created women's structures in these unions. Rather, they reach out to women workers and reveal their problems through training and grassroots organization in the workplaces they organize, or through newsletters

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<sup>38</sup> Akgökçe, *ibid*, 2022.

where women can express their problems, as Dev Tekstil does. There is no feminist perspective here, but they highlight demands such as daycare centers for children and equal pay for equal work.

The stance of the Birlik Union (Unity Union), which declares that it is against discrimination (language, race, color, gender, sexual orientation and gender identity, etc.) in general rather than include articles related to women in its statute, is as follows:

We have articles not only men and women but which state that we have an approach that accepts gender equality. This is how we implement it. I worked in a labor union for ten years, although it was very developed, when I compare the unions here and there, it is very different here. In other words, they cannot achieve the dynamism of this place advocating gender equality, no matter how hard they try. This may be due to us having been acting with this perspective since our establishment, and perhaps because most of us are women. (Interview No: 11)

While the Imece Domestic Workers Union is already a “women's union”, almost all of whose members are women, the independent unions with a direct women's commission are TEHIS and the Teachers' Union, as we have mentioned. The statute of TEHIS includes the article "establishing awareness of women's freedom and equality in social life, and within this framework, eliminating all forms of violence and harassment against women in social life and in the workplace". The fact that both the women in its executive bodies and some of its members are in the women's movement and, in their own words, "actively engaged women's struggle" were undoubtedly influential in establishing a women's commission and in keeping it going. In this context, they stated that they aim to struggle both to solve the problems of women workers and against sexist attitudes within the union:

We have established women's commissions against harassment and violence in the workplaces we work. When our female friends are mobbed and harassed in the workplace, we bring a solution to this situation as women. First, we meet with our friend who was subjected to violence as a commission, and then we meet with the management. Upon the statement of the woman who comes to us, we first sit down with the woman friend. The priority for us is the woman friend's demand. If she wants to disclose what has happened it, we disclose it. If she wants to get her rights and leave, we provide that for her. We demand the support or solidarity of women's organizations where we cannot cope with the situation by ourselves as a commission. We carry out workshops on gender with many male friends. There may be situations where newly organized workers make sexist statements and do not take women workers seriously. Several times, I explained to workers who cursed in my presence why they should not swear. Their opinions do not completely change, but at least they know that they should not swear in the union. They know that they should not look down upon women in the union and the struggle. They are aware that these are unacceptable things within our union. (Interview No: 5)

The women policy and stance on gender equality of the Teachers' Union, which was officially established in September 2021, is both detailed in the statute and materialized through the women's commission. In its statute, the union states that it aims to “provide solutions to women's problems arising from being the oppressed sex and to improve women's living and working conditions”. At the same time, it undertakes to ensure that women members take part more actively in the executive bodies and that the union will adopt a gender-sensitive approach when planning its budget. Among the duties and powers of the general women's secretary responsible for work concerning women in the union, there are articles such as establishing commissions, working to improve the social and personal rights of women members, and organizing activities for women and LGBTI+s. Following the demands of Eğitim-Sen (Education and Science Workers' Union), they are highlighting demands such as equal pay for equal

work, daycare centers, and nursing leave. However, the member we interviewed stated that they have not yet made the women's commission fully operational because the union had just been established and they were facing so many problems:

We looked at the statutes of other unions, and studied how they operated. And also, in a place where women are the majority and with patriarchy on the rise, it was necessary to discuss women's labor separately. But in the process here is what happens: the problems in that women's commission in fact always end up being postponed because we are a new union and have to deal with so many problems at once. Always saying there are other issues, this in fact is not a field of work that proceeds well and properly right now. On the occasion of agendas such as November 25, and March 8, the way for having activities may be cleared, but other than that, it is obstructed. You know, we always have meetings, we say let's do this, let's do that, but other problems end up coming to the fore. There are times when we postpone. (Interview Number: 22)

In order to understand the attitude of the trade unions on gender equality, the indicator that must be paid attention to is undoubtedly what is done in practice, for example, whether there are structures such as women's commissions, or if not, whether there is any specific work done concerning women. Another indicator concerns the place women occupy in unions. All of the independent unions had women in their executive positions. One of the executives in TOMİS, which organizes in the metal sector where male workers are dominant, was a woman. Women were predominant in the executive positions of Dev Tekstil, whose president and general secretary were women. The Birlik Union stated that almost half of them are women in terms of both the executive bodies and membership.

As for the Teachers' Union, although it was the most inclusive union for women, in terms of both its statute and the women's commission it established, and being a field where predominantly women work, its president, secretary general and secretary in charge of organization were all men. Therefore, equality was not achieved because men held the most important positions. Among these unions, TEHİS sets a distinctive example in that it symbolizes equality between men and women at the highest level by adopting the co-spokesperson system rather than the presidential position.

## **5.2. Unions Affiliated to Confederations**

Genel-İş (Public Service Employees Union), one of the unions of DİSK, does not have articles related to women in its statute and the statute does not provide for the establishment of a women's structure. There is an article in the statute of Enerji-Sen (Energy Workers Union) that aims "to find solutions to the problems women experience and to improve their living and working conditions, based on the fact that women are the oppressed sex", but there is no women's structure. Dev Sağlık-İş (Progressive Healthcare Workers Union) is one of the unions that has included the establishment of the Department of Women Workers' Issues in its statute, but has failed to implement it. Again, while it is stated in the statute of Dev Turizm-İş (Progressive Tourism Workers Union) that a Department on Work Related to Women can be established and that co-chairmanship is adopted in the position of "vice presidency", however, there is no women's structure and co-chairmanship is not implemented in practice. Gıda-İş (Food Industry Workers Union) is another union that includes women workers and the organization of women workers extensively in its statute, but does not have a women's structure. In addition to the article "to carry out activities to ensure equality between men and women in working life and positive discrimination in favor of women" in the statute, if at least 25 percent of the number of workers working within the scope of CLA are women, there is a commitment to make sure that at least one of the workplace representatives

is a woman and a separate women workers committee is established in that workplace. In addition, the union's executive bodies include the Women's Workers' Board, and its specialized departments include the Women's Workers' Department. It was stated that the union's not having CLA authorization hindered the realization of the work foreseen.

With the amendment to its statute in 2012, the Sosyal-İş (Social Security, Education, Office, Trade, Cooperative and Fine Arts Workers Union) was assigned the duty and authorization to establish "women's commissions to defend the equality of women and men, to take the measures necessary for this equality to be put into practice in union work, to win over the working women in the branch of activity to the union and to ensure the active participation of working women in union work".<sup>39</sup> There is also a women's commission that has started its activities recently. In the Birleşik Metal-İş (United Metal Workers Union) there is a central women's commission, secured by the statute, and actively functioning, as stipulated in the article "to carry out activities to ensure equality between men and women and positive discrimination in favor of women" in the statute of Birleşik Metal-İş.

The statute of Tez-Koop (Trade, Office, Education and Fine Arts Workers Union), affiliated to Türk İş, contains the phrase "the union strives to ensure equality between men and women". The union publishes a women's magazine as well.

We can say that the level of women's presence in executive bodies and participation in decision-making processes is weaker when compared to independent unions. For example, although the Genel-İş Union has increased the number of female members (25,000 of the 130 thousand members are women) in recent years, the union's executive bodies, supervisory and disciplinary committees (there is only one woman here) are made up entirely of men. There are only five women branch heads in its nearly fifty branches across Turkey. Only one of the five executive board members of Sosyal-İş is a woman, and she was appointed only recently. The union professionals (president, branch secretary and financial secretary) are men. Enerji-Sen is also a union in which all of the executive team are men and which has employed its only female organizing specialist very recently. There are no female professionals at Birleşik Metal-İş either, all of the executives are male. However, it is a union that has increased the number of its female members and representatives over time. The interviewee, who works as an organizing specialist in the union, stated that their aim is to include women in the professional executive team, for example as branch head or in a similar position. Gıda-İş and Dev Sağlık-İş, on the other hand, have two women each on their executive boards, which consists of five people. The president of Dev Sağlık-İş and the secretary general of Gıda-İş are women.

Surely, the quantitative presence of women in executive bodies does not bring about a change on its own when unions have no effective women's policy. However, the fact that the executive levels are entirely or largely composed of men –and the fact that this has always been so– indicates the presence of a systematic and established gender discrimination that excludes women in the unions, and shows that male dominance is the main factor constituting the structure of the unions.

### ***Making women's commissions work***

The fact that no progress has been made in women policy and women's organization within the unions in general –with the exception of a few examples– again reveals a well-established and systematic

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<sup>39</sup> Urhan, *ibid*, p. 88

problem. One of the problems that many women from different unions pointed out during our interviews was that the approach to the problems of women members was very unbalanced and that developing a policy about this often depended on the initiative of men. In many cases, the differences of opinion and approach between the headquarters of the union and its branches, the fact that the branches face opposition from the center when they wish to take an initiative, or that the heads of the branches do not take action in spite of the center prevent work targeting women from being established as a decision of principle. For example, one of the factors that enabled the women's commission in Birleşik Metal-İş (United Metal Workers Union) to be well established and function was that the union headquarters accepted this as a matter of principle and statute and then spread it to the branches:

The commission here was a commission that was in the by-laws but it was not active. It was almost non-existent. Executives said to me, how can we make this commission work? We first ran it as a central commission, we did not establish it in branches. Because that wasn't easy. For that to happen, branches need some time, they need see to see central determination and arrive at some level of consent. We ran it centrally, then the general assembly arrived at that stage. In the general assembly, we said, let's write this commission into the statute as branch commissions, as both central women's commission and branch commissions. And an agreement was reached on the statute, on the establishment of branch commissions. Of course, this has not been an easy process. Then we gave further shape to the central women's commission. Then we wrote to the women's commission, to the branches telling them to assign women [to the commissions]. They sent someone once, they didn't send her the next time, it kept changing all the time. I remember giving the same training to women's commissions for a whole year. You tell a lot of people about the purpose of the commission, you talk about gender equality, you talk about violence and abuse. I talked about these unrelentingly, tirelessly while they kept changing, some changed and others didn't and we ended up getting in touch with a lot of women. Actually, we in a way talked about ourselves a little, about what this commission wants. When we later began to establish branch commissions, we had an area already prepared for women. It was important to understand if the women's commission is indeed a field of work. This also is a question. Is this commission [a group of] women who take pictures next to the presidents or are they people who can really improve their rights for themselves? (...) We established branch commissions at the 2019 general assembly (...) The union has a women's policy and if this policy benefits women, why shouldn't women come to us? Why should women run away from the union while men come running to the union? Ok, they have loads, but if you put yourself into order as a union, if you see to it that you benefit women, women go for the task. (Interview No: 7)

At the end of these few years of work at Birleşik Metal-İş, women's training programs were held and standardized with the support of feminist organizations and various relevant organizations, gender training was given to male members, the number of female workplace representatives increased, women were included in the supervisory and disciplinary committees. Significant steps were taken regarding violence and harassment as well. For example, it was stated that male perpetrators of violence were punished and this gave women strength. Another important development was the addition of articles related to gender equality with references to CEDAW and the Istanbul Convention to the CLA, and later the opening of a direct "gender equality" section in the CLA. This includes a number of sub-titles such as gender-based occupational health, gender-based risk assessment, combating violence against and harassment of women, and gender equality training. This example can be considered as the institutionalization of the women's structure within the union.

The interviewee stated that her taking place in the feminist movement had its affect, and that the women's movement/feminist movement in general was influential in the gender perspective of the union and in the formation of its women policy.



In Sosyal-İş (Social Security, Education, Office, Trade, Cooperative and Fine Arts Workers Union), on the other hand, there is a women's commission that women have set up upon much struggle but cannot actively operate. According to the interviewee, the first thing they did when they established the women's commission was to reach out to female members. They immediately organized a meeting. They tried to prepare a statement for March 8, but all their efforts were thwarted by men in executive positions:

We were the first to establish a women's commission. In fact, we held a meeting with the representatives of Sosyal-İş for the first time before that. There, we decided to set up a commission. We immediately took down the names of the attending women friends. Afterwards, we organized a breakfast. Of course, we didn't aim very high because we were new to this kind of work after all. We looked at it in terms of what we can do, how we can attract women friends. (...) Then there were protests on March 8 and November 25, we wanted to take it there (...). But participation was very low. In other words, we did not have very much chance to move it there (...) Well, actually, because of the way labor unions work... For example, we wanted to do something, we wanted to phone our women union members one by one and make a call to them saying, you have a union, you can reach us when you have problems, there are women here at the executive level, too. But they tried to obstruct it. So we couldn't do it. Sending messages to women, to celebrate March 8, etc., these are obstructed by the administrations (...) We make our declarations at the Istanbul Convention protests, also at November 25 events. I even prepared a statement on November 25, it was blocked. I wanted to publish it, it was blocked. And I said, if you don't publish it as it is, I will expose this union. About the LGBTI commission, we have LGBTI friends, I wanted to ask them as well, is there anything you want to add, add a few sentences, I said. This annoyed them very much. It was also the first time that such an activity was being carried out in the union. Both the head office and the branch wanted make some changes to it, but we published it. (Interview No: 16)

### ***The problem of male intervention and control in women-focused-work***

The following statement of one of the interviewees: "Women-focused-work is allowed if the man at the head of the union leans toward it", while another interviewee speculated "probably the president of the union does not interfere much" when talking about a positive example, women-focused-work not being accepted as a matter of principle with an equalitarian and emancipatory feminist perspective in labor unions, all lead to its being open to men's interventions and being controlled by men. Moreover, there were also women who stated that the attitudes of some unions towards women "do not go beyond being a showcase". For example, for the women workers who are members of Tez-Koop-İş (Trade, Office, Education and Fine Arts Workers Union), the women-focused-work of the union had no practical meaning:

There is a women's magazine. They think it's women policy. Moreover, it is supposed to be a union whose women representatives are a majority across Turkey. At that time, our branch chair was a woman and she said we will engage in a lot of policies concerning women. But no voice came up about violence or harassment. (...) During my first two years in the union, there was another branch. That branch had a system where women were in the administration and there were a lot of women representatives, and the chair of our executive board was also a woman. But this also was a showcase. In my term when they removed me from duty of representation, there were women who received threats like me. They canceled the representation of most of the women who would not reconcile with them. In our term, we organized women's activities in the union. At that time, women representatives were removed, but they were replaced by women representatives. The women were there as show cases. (Interview No: 1)

They were publishing a women's magazine in the union. I thought they must have something on women's policy, but it never reached me. As a woman employee, I have been working for eight years now but that women's magazine never reached me. (...) Our female friends are being oppressed a lot, they say, we know you have many problems, we are here to solve them. None of my problems have been resolved. (Interview No: 4)

These structural problems in the unions, which are based on and shaped by male dominance, both put a strain on the women who strive to carry out women-focused work in the unions and weaken the relationship of the members with the union. All of this is not only discouraging and obstructive, it shows that some unions only approve of a women's structure as long as it moves along their own lines of acceptance. This is undoubtedly related to established patriarchal relations, as can be seen in the following statement:

As long as you do not harm their space, men say let a women's commission be established, women take care of it anyway, there is nothing that touches me and they establish it. But to the extent that the women's commission starts to touch them after a while, I think it will disturb them. (Interview Number: 22)

Another interviewee criticized the men seeing women's structures as a "showcase", saying, "They use the women's commission to project a good image." Undoubtedly, some unions make efforts to put forward women's problems and demands and to represent their interests, but because these are carried out through the efforts and initiative of certain women in the unions and are not recognized at the executive level, they cannot achieve long-lasting establishment as a matter of principle. Therefore, even if there are women's structures within the union, the fact that male presidents and administrations often see gender equality as a matter that provides "prestige" prevents the patriarchal structure in the unions from being weakened, and thus results in sustaining male power.

## **6. Critique of Classical Unionism, Alternatives and Independent Unions**

People are looking for a way out to solve the problems. For there is a problem, but there is no solution. At this point, as workers, we are all looking for a way out. Not like a savior, but at least as a guide, like someone telling us what to do. Sometimes people really can't see or know some things. At this point, one wants a guide. But when you can't see anything from the union even when you are a union member, of course, the logic of going to a place which will be beneficial for you, prevails. Because what we call unions are major unions, there are major unions in Turkey that have been established for years. When we say union, these come to mind. But none of them are of use today. That's why it's necessary to give new things a chance for something new to come into existence. (Interview No: 4)

The person who made this statement is a market employee and member of the Tez-Koop-İş union. She worked for minimum wage and had two children to look after on her own. Apart from certain rights that came with the CLA, she received minimum wage despite having worked for long years. In recent years, her belief in the union had further weakened when decisions coming out of the CLA meetings took away even their old gains. In fact, this situation gives rise to the criticism that the general tendency that limits organizing workers to the confines of dues and wages, drags the workers into a more unorganized state and despair. Many women we interviewed, both from independent and DİSK unions, stated that when passing the threshold and making the CLA are the main criteria for success and gain, the workers develop relations that remain only within these limits with the unions and cannot establish a sense of belonging to them.

There are many problems, but I think the biggest problem is the absence of a unionism focused on the organization of workers. Well, we talked about collective bargaining unionism. In fact, collective bargaining agreement is a gain of the workers, but today it has turned into something that furthers disorganization amidst them. The big unions say the following, as we recently saw in an example: Come join us, we will make a collective labor agreement, we will do it on your behalf. The worker goes, a tendency to cut corners prevails after a certain point. Okay, let's become members, let the union get authorization [for CLA]. Those processes are not short, they take several years. What happens to the workers? They continue to experience the same conditions [at the workplace]. Then the union sits at the table with the boss, the more organized the worker is there [at the workplace], the more pressure he can put on the union and get more rights. If not, the worker is often not even aware of what the union is signing on his behalf. You ask her, what's in your contract, she doesn't even know it. Now, is this organization? This does not achieve anything in terms of organization. At the moment, I think the biggest shortcoming of the working class is its inability to act in an organized way, and the current traditional unionism does not provide that, I think. (Interview No: 12)

The issue should not be limited to wage unionism. This is one of our biggest criticisms too, well, I make a collective labor agreement and the unionist gets his salary anyway. There are salaries you wouldn't believe. This is the case in all unions with CLA authority and high income (...) This is the limit of what you can get on the basis of sole economist struggle, wage unionism. Some get a salary of 60 thousand liras, and others continue to work saying, "How nice, my salary has improved a bit." (...) The worker must also take part in the planning of production and planning of service, otherwise she will remain in a more passive position. It is not, the union will come and increase my income and I will continue to work, no, the worker needs to be in the process as a subject. (Interview Number: 21)

There is a bureaucratic structure that is so detached from the class that it does not deal with the worker (...) They go to a workplace, they negotiate with the employer. Well, it is not possible for people to understand the union when there is no struggle. I can see the lack of that struggle. I think this is the main shortcoming. Wage unionism has been practiced for years. The problem is just that. Okay, wage is a very important thing, we all work for it anyway, but alongside this, social rights and gender equality are also important, there may be other kinds of social rights as well. No one talks about these. Let's skip these and come to the items on wage [they say]. In fact, this is the way the union has functioned until today. (Interview No: 13)

The fact that the unions only focus on reaching the number to pass the threshold, get stuck in bureaucracy, break their ties with the class, prevent the workers from going on strike and resisting, in other words, suck up the anger of the workers, the nepotism within the union, the union professionals working for high wages while workers get low wages, male dominance entrenched in the unions and inability of women workers to have their voices heard are other criticisms that have been expressed. While confederations such as Türk-İş and Hak-İş are not places on which much hope is placed because they are engaged in "yellow unionism", expressions such as "it is not the same as before" or "bureaucratic structure which is detached from the class and does not deal with workers" show that there also are disappointments about DİSK. Because DİSK is expected to be ahead of the other confederations:

For the continuity of DİSK, for the existence of DİSK, we have to criticize. We will continue to make these criticisms. Not only concerning the women's issue, but also concerning other policies. The minimum wage is being announced. Türk-İş went and made an agreement, Hak-İş went and made an agreement, but as DİSK what did you do against the minimum wage in the places where you are organized? Let's organize the worker. If we are DİSK, let's say we do not accept this minimum wage. We are a labor union.

Non-governmental organizations make statements, say we will never accept this minimum wage, we condemn it, withdraw the price hikes. Don't condemn the hikes, you're a labor union. (Interview No: 13)

Why don't you use the power you derive from workers? Why can't you just say, hey step aside, stop this? (Interview No: 15)

One of the other criticisms directed at classical unions is that union executive boards are made up of men and current unionism is almost identified with male dominance. One interviewee stated that the executive bodies of unions organized even in the sectors where predominantly women work consist of “men in suits” and that this needs to change. As the interviewee we interviewed from Gıda-İş (Food Industry Workers Union) states below, what is in question is more of a structural problem, where [the union] consisting of men and naturally becoming bureaucratized cuts off its ties with struggle:

So, of course, it is very clear that we cannot move forward with the current union mentality. We cannot break the current union mentality, it has become a caste. This includes the fact that too many men are in power. It is like they are in the driver's seat of an earlship.. Looking from the outside, we say yes, they have broken their ties with the class. Not only in terms of the wages they get, but also their lifestyle, ways of expression and dressing style... A factory worker doesn't go to work like that, you have detached yourself from there. You have washed yourself off of their problems. It's not a matter of signing a contract around a table wearing suits and ties. It's the process leading up to the contract that makes you a unionist. Unionism is not about putting your signature there. There is a reaction to this. Some of the workers display a state of giving in to this, [they think] we cannot break this. There is a section of people who think that yellow unionism cannot be broken or changed. (Interview No: 18)

On the other hand, it should be noted that voices which challenge both yellow unionism and male dominance in unions are rising. One interviewee, a market worker who had serious problems with her union while a member of Tez-Koop-İş and was later fired for her organizing efforts, believed that it was possible to build an alternative. However, according to her, one of the problems was that workers' perception of organizing consisted of membership in classical unions and wage unionism. According to her, workers' organization could not be confined to this. For example, during the Covid-19 pandemic, workers founded a theater group, published a magazine, carried out online training and established a women's solidarity network independently of their unions. This work focusing on women workers and their problems brought a collective organization into being and even attracted the attention of their unions:

We also came to see how serious an obstacle working conditions constitute before people discovering their talents. For a whole year, we argued with the overseers and tried to fix our shifts so that we could spare time for this work. (...) Until this process, people thought of only the labor union when the word organization was mentioned, but now people have started to internalize the Barcode Women's Solidarity Network. In fact, upon these, the union called us and stated that they wished to join their work with ours. However, we had to reject the union's request, as we were concerned that this situation might put the workers on a blacklist. (Interview No: 1)

There are many examples where women workers went far beyond their unions, went beyond classical unionism, struggled against sexism in unions, in short, tried to transform the unions. In 2019, Genel-İş member women working in Kadıköy Municipality carried out a very important feminist campaign under the name of Purple List in preparation for the branch administration elections. They had joined the union

“not to add color as women, but as a fundamental component of the working class”<sup>40</sup> and therefore demanded equal representation. Their aim was to challenge the patriarchal system in the union by compiling a women-only list against the all-male candidate lists. In addition to the demand for women's equal participation in the administration and decision-making process in the union, they tried to add articles that directly concern all women, such as menstrual leave, quota, daycare center, equal pay for equal work, paternity leave, and defining gender-based crimes of violence correctly. The first reaction coming from the men in the union was “you are dividing the class” or even “you are being sexist”. Despite this, women achieved very important results in this campaign. For example, they passed the article on menstrual leave despite the unionist men who said, “This is shameful, how should we pass it” or who tried to pass the menstrual leave as “social leave”, censuring the name and turning it into a right granted to men as well. The most important result for them was that women started to talk about their problems more and that an increase in consciousness had taken place:

With the release of the Purple List, many of our women comrades actually became representatives or began to hold the representatives accountable. Thus, awareness of unionization has increased. Naturally, when there is a collective labor agreement, now they say we are going altogether. And this, of course, is a reason for resistance, a reason for organizing. (Interview No: 14)

One of the most important things that emerged after the Purple List was the issue of violence. Cases of violence began to come into the open. In the fourth article, we added the Istanbul Convention to the articles. The union party did not understand why we wanted to add it, anyway. The Convention had not yet been annulled at the time. We said that the union and the employer should make a commitment to observe the principles set forth in the Istanbul Convention. Kadıköy Municipality accepted that article without any discussion. For example, when our friends who were victims of gender-based violence heard about the existence of the Purple List, they came to us saying, I lived something like this, what can we do about it. (Interview No: 13)

It should be noted that DİSK member women have expectations concerning the realization of gender equality. However, according to them, the work done is not enough, and the male executives of some unions even prevent the work being done. The problem here is that male dominance in the unions has become structured and established.

Can't DİSK put the quota into practice, it can. It can realize it very easily. Can't a labor confederation with a woman as a president realize this? But from whom shall we expect this, that is, if we do not expect it from DİSK, who else should we expect it from? Shall we discuss this issue with Türk-İş or Hak-İş? It is not possible for either Türk-İş or Hak-İş to take any steps concerning this as long as DİSK doesn't. (Interview No: 14)

Unions try to prevent campaigns/work like the Purple List or allow them to proceed only up to a certain level because they are patriarchal. For example, some of the articles they put in the CLA (such as menstrual leave and daycare center) remained limited to certain places. Equal pay for equal work and quota were articles that the union directly eliminated. The statements such as “childcare center is not a very important article” or “most of these articles do not concern us” made by the men in their own unions are attitudes that seriously prevent women from moving ahead in unions. Just as one of the interviewees who was in the Purple List pointed out, “the problem of a female worker is still not seen as

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<sup>40</sup> Ayşecan Ay, [“Biz artık şarkı dinlemek değil, şarkı söylemek istiyoruz!”](#) *Duvar*, 15 September 2020.

a worker's problem.” However, campaigns like this bear important warnings that the unions cannot continue the way they are:

The Purple List was actually a warning about the future of unions. (...) This representation crisis discredits the unions. Your base isn't just male anymore. You have to organize and recruit women. (Interview No: 14)

### ***On independent unions***

Independent unions are organizations that have been on the rise in recent years and that we have included in this study. They differ from classical unions in many aspects. We think it is important to include the questions of why women become members of independent labor unions and how they organize there, as well as their perspectives on issues of both class organization and organization of women workers. Below, the statements of women who are members of TEHİS, the Birlik Union and Teachers' Union, respectively, show that these unions emerged as a response to the inactivity and bureaucratic structures of classical unions.

Interventions have begun to increase recently. It has become very difficult to change and transform the classical unions. Instead, alternative unions and initiatives began to increase. (Interview No: 5)

We are a fighting organization. Agreements etc. these are tools, the important thing here is that workers are able to act together. If workers are not in, don't count us in, this is what we say to the workers. We have said that we engage in class unionism from the outset. (Interview No: 12)

The silence of the unions under circumstances where poverty has increased so much, their not choosing to proceed leaning on their organizations becomes a price we all pay. Level of unionization is very low in Turkey, however unions play a very decisive role. Lots of resistances took place in this process and actions were carried out mostly by movements –not unions. We backed these up too, we all gave as much support as we could, we held meetings with the workers in resistance in many places, but if they were unionized, their unions would have put pressure on them and prevented them from carrying out those actions. From where does the union get its power? This is very important. (Interview No: 11)

They are so much used to deskwork, they are so much used to not stepping outside the limits of what is written in the bureaucracy that they cannot produce alternatives. But what did we do, we walked out of the Ministry of National Education, busted in the [educational] institution [in question]. We raised our voices, they had to vacate the classrooms. (...) In that sort of unionism, with its fights over seats, with its paperwork, after a while you start to forget the street. You should never turn your face away from the street. For example, we hold local meetings. Our friends proposed, let's go to Ankara, let's go to the ministry. It comes from the masses, not from the center, not from the administration. So, we said ok, we will go to Ankara on 30 August. If we had been committed to confederation affiliated unionism, we probably would not have arrived at this decision. We listen to the masses because they are where we derive our power from. Do the masses want to go to the front of the Ministry, let's go right away. It is whatever the masses want to do, because they are the ones who are subjected to this, they are the ones who live in the sector. We currently do not have any professional [unionists] in the union, for example, we do not have any non-working members. Each of our members works in the private sector. So does our general president, and so does our secretary general. (Interview Number: 22)

There are many independent unions. Unions established entirely with the understanding of a revolutionary class union. There is a need for this because the confederations that call themselves revolutionary have turned into places where the worker does not take his problem. Trade unionism in which unionists lead a lavish life on the workers' dues, is not class unionism. Therefore, there was a need for unions established on the basis of such an understanding. Not unions confined to narrow economic

work in factories, the independent unions emerge in a way that will restore revolutionary class identity in the society. (Interview No: 2)

As we mentioned before, independent unions are organizations focused on direct action and resistance, "combat organizations", as some say. Increasing the number of their members, passing the threshold and getting CLA authorization is not something they exclude or reject completely, but it is not their priority either. Because there is a clear opposition to bureaucracy. Concepts such as "gain" or "concrete interest" can therefore be in a different context for them. For example, while gains in the general perception are results attained by means of tools such as CLA, for them, busting in private education institutions that make teachers work on holidays and having bosses back off is also a gain. Most of them have strong ties with social movements and street politics in general, and at least as we understand from women included in this study, they are not far from the unique problems and demands of women workers, even if not on a feminist line in general. However, apart from the two cases with women's commissions, it is still difficult to say that there is a clear policy on women. For example, when criticizing the bureaucracy in the classical unions, the fact that it was actually a patriarchal bureaucracy was not taken into account.

On the other hand, some interviewees had question marks in their minds as to what this new and rising trend and such search for alternatives brought/will bring along in the context of class struggle and the direction it would take. More precisely, some of the women who are members of DİSK unions found this emerging trend valuable and meaningful, but pointed out some of its limitations. First of all, there were those who, while reserving their right to criticize DİSK, criticized the generalization equating all DİSK unions with yellow unions and ignoring the struggle given. Secondly, some interviewees thought that the resistances that rose one after the other did not convert into long-lasting strength and organization, and therefore withered away because they sometimes got jammed up in narrow group interests as a result of not having sufficiently been turned into a matter of common concern. Finally, there were views that the incompetence of independent unions would eventually become an obstacle before the membership for them, as trade unionism among workers was largely entrenched as gains made as a result of bargaining with capital.

Anger at institutionalized unions is rightful in some aspects, it has parts I agree with. But sometimes there may occur generalizations, saying all are the same anyway. You try to do something in the field, it becomes invisible, because everything gets dumped up in generalizations, ignored. What you're doing here whether it be related to work related to women or something else, is looked down upon saying if it is a union doing it, it's useless. (Interview No: 7)

Long-lasting gains are important and it is important that these gains reach somewhere through institutionalization. Three of our friends are resisting at that door but when nothing changes in the life of the worker inside, maybe when pressure increases, and moreover with no results, when there are no long-lasting gains, when hope can't be increased, [the worker] does not see that as an alternative. For example, we speak a little more cautiously when criticizing DİSK, this union, that union. Of course, we criticize, but when we criticize without offering an alternative, being against organization [per se] spreads among workers. (...) If I go to the workers and constantly denigrate DİSK and if I have not organized its alternative, those workers completely break ties with union organization. It is necessary to be very careful about this. By organizing the alternative, people do not sit idle, they discuss, they try to do something. And of course, we will not abstain from criticizing. (Interview Number: 21)

Their criticisms are good, they step up at the right places, but unionization is a slightly different process. It has to have authorization. And workers do not approach without authorization, they may say this union has no authorization and say why should I become a member? Again, they have a big task before them, they need to organize in big workplaces to be able to get authorization. Otherwise, the work they carry out is really good compared to other unions, I like them very much. (Interview No: 16)

The situation, problems, and dilemmas of classical unionism; as well as a detailed and comprehensive discussion on the emerging alternative and independent unions is, no doubt, a subject that goes beyond the limits of this research. However, when discussing the issue of unions and the organization of women workers, it is necessary to see that there are other problems besides male dominance in unions and to take into account the fact that this situation affects/will affect women as well.

## **7. Relations with the Feminist Movement: Building the Common Struggle**

The feminist movement and women's struggle, which have a long history in Turkey, continue to be the most powerful and large-scale social movement and social opposition today. It is also possible to say that feminist discourse and practices affect women-centered work in unions to a certain extent. Feminists' engagement with trade unions and the labor movement in general has taken many forms over many years. The Novamed Strike and the Desa Resistance of the mid-2000s are examples which feminists actively participated in and campaigned about. The Women's Initiative Against Male Domination in Trade Unions and Professional Chambers, which came together at the call of a woman who was abused in Sine-Sen (Cinema Workers Union) in 2009, was another important breakthrough. In the recent years, the Flormar Resistance was a resistance that was not limited to visiting the resistance tent in front of the factory, but also one which feminists acted in solidarity with and expanded by taking actions on the street. Resistances wherein women workers take part and feminists support continue today as well.

Within the scope of this study, one of the issues we talked about in the interviews we held with unionized and unionist women was the association of the women's movement/feminist movement with the labor movement, the discourse and policies it produced on women's labor, and more specifically, its grounds of contact with the unions. Some interviewees found the feminist movement's relationship with the labor movement weak or insufficient. For another interviewee, the problem was that the feminist movement was "far from reality". Because, according to her, while living in poverty, workers could see issues such as gender equality as secondary or unnecessary. However, when we consider the two situations expressed by the same interviewee below, an important topic of discussion emerges:

Well, the feminist movement seems a bit unrealistic to the workers' movement. To put it correctly, I observed this when I was in a labor union (...) Our friends said, let's do a gender workshop in the union, you know, it would be a beginning or something. I said, it can't be done at this time, so I'll bring the workers, I even said I'd ask, I called him on the phone, how are you, what are you doing? Will you come if we do a gender workshop? He said what are you talking about, I enrolled my little boy in the kindergarten, they cancelled his registration now because I couldn't pay for it. He said, I'm trying to find money. If gender is going to meet my needs right now, okay, for instance. How can I say, it seems a bit far from reality, when I talk to feminist friends around me, it is always pedantical. (...)

For example, our posters "Istanbul Convention Keeps You Alive" were put up. The workers came and said, does the chairman know about this hanging here? It was workers supporting Saadet Party who said this. I was so stunned, I said why. He said this weakens the family structure, makes girls lesbian and boys gay. Our president came, he said what is going on here, he sat down and told them about the Istanbul Convention, saying there is no such thing. He even said our [x] friend will explain it better, she's a woman,



she'll better explain what she's going through. I start talking, they don't listen to me at all, they don't take me [into account] as an individual. They accepted what the president said as true, for example, that poster did not come down from there. (Interview Number: 17)

These narratives in themselves show the fundamental importance of the issue of gender equality, which is considered unimportant or secondary and seen as not filling the belly by male workers. Because when seen as secondary, there is a risk that people may conclude that the sexism of male workers can be tolerable in the class struggle. This is the danger of normalizing the sexism of male workers within the same union while fighting against capital. For example, if it were not for the positive attitude and initiative of the union president, the situation could have led to workers taking down the Istanbul Convention poster. Whereas, if the struggle against sexism had been established within the union and had become a principle, neither the woman specialist in the union would have faced the situation of not being taken seriously by the men nor would there have been any need for the intervention of the male president.

The example of Birleşik Metal-İş (United Metal Workers Union), when considered together with this experience, shows that things may have the potential to change if the issue of gender equality is first accepted by the union as a principle:

We have to realize some of our articles [in the CLA], centrally from top to bottom. One of these articles is the gender equality article. For example, fellow workers who have no warm contact with the women's movement or the feminist movement do not come and say to you, let's put in gender equality. But we still put in our gender equality article as administration from top to bottom, because the union announced that it adopted gender equality or said something like a statement of position. I also put it in the statute, "I am here to implement gender equality. I accept that I will never do anything [negative] in my union regarding religion, language, gender, sexual orientation." (Interview No: 7)

The message of this attitude of the union and gender trainings given to male members are as follows: "In this union if you harass, you will be fired. You cannot hold a female friend in contempt in this union, she is your equal." (Interview No: 7). Therefore, seeing gender issue as a secondary issue and perceiving it as something for the future means postponing the initiation of a possible change to an indefinite date, and never getting to it at all in a world where class exploitation, hunger and poverty continue as a system. However, it is possible to fight this dual struggle together, that is, the struggle against sexism within both the class and the union being waged together with the struggle against capitalism and class exploitation.

Another unionist woman thought that the feminist movement did not highlight labor's demands very much and generally focused on issues such as male violence and harassment, but the two issues had to be taken together:

Now, I think the current women's movement or the feminist women's movement has, let me say, shortcomings concerning working women, the problems of working women, the problems of labor. That leg must be completed. But, as far as I have followed, I am not sure they have very clear ideas about us here, I am not very much in it, in the feminist movement I mean, not directly. Yes, feminist women and women's struggle are, not the only, but an important actor in the development of social awareness related to the disclosure of mobbing, prevention of abuse and femicide as well as the issue of gender which is now being discussed in relation to women. But on November 25th, I see the mass there, the demands there. We do not often come across many demands related to labor. It is not a bad thing that a more individual discourse, on individual liberation of women, individual comfort of women, and her personal preferences have appeared. A good thing but missing something. We will reach final liberation through the

struggle together, a struggle without class-without exploitation. Otherwise, even if all of our individual demands are accepted, we will still not be able to normalize and lead a happy life. It is only through the organization of labor, its emancipation, the elimination of exploitation of labor, and full equality shall we attain freedom. Shall we labor organizations, if I describe myself as a woman trade unionist waging labor struggle, [with] feminist ideology and feminist demands taking precedence over these demands, are we to see the harassment by the foreman and not see the exploitation of labor by that boss? Are we not going to see them make her work for 10-12 hours? Shall we not see her low wages? Shall we not see them deposit part of the minimum wage in the bank and take part back by hand? Is that less important than her harassment? Of course, we will not be harassed either. However, when we become stronger, we will both prevent harassment and cut off exploitation. We can definitely fight together, I am saying that leg is missing (...) We need to discuss all of these together. Not by giving one precedence over the other. I think that maybe more unity can be achieved that way. (Interview No: 18)

However, the interviewees, who think that feminist discourse and demands correspond to something in workplaces and factories in the world of women workers, and who see the problems of women workers directly as an issue of the women's movement, expressed their thoughts as follows:

We have cited many problems that we suffer here because we are women, and there still are many things we haven't cited yet. And the main reason for this is very obvious, we are from a patriarchal society. Feminism is very important here. And if we say sisterhood, we actually have to see the workers who are exploited in those factories and the teachers exploited in the private sector. Because, including these friends... we may be women in the academy, women students, high school students... she can open a field for herself. She can find an area where she is independent from her home, but we work six days, we deal with the husband and father at home, with the boss at work. There is no space where we can liberate ourselves. And as such, we actually are very disconnected from feminism, from the struggle. We are directly exposed to the male system. In fact, as the feminist movement, we need to think about liberating areas. (Interview Number: 22)

An important pillar of the issue of organization on the agenda of women workers is the presence of a big women's movement in Turkey. I see its influence in my field. Many women come consciously, knowing their problem and its solution. Of course, no such education is given in schools. In the information age, a young generation whose awareness has increased with the experiences attained through social media is arriving. This generation can now talk very comfortably about menstrual leave. When I went to the textile workers for training purposes, they talked about the right to menstrual leave. They had asked how they could win menstrual leave, how they could deal with this situation when they suffer from menstrual pain. We wouldn't get such questions five years ago. Young friends are breaking taboos because they are already more liberated when they arrive in the union. I believe that in time something will happen that will push the unions more. And this occupies a very important place for the progress of the unions. (Interview No: 7)

An interviewee from the Birlik Sendikası (Unity Union) expressed that the feminist movement believes that the topics of the struggle of the women's movement and their own struggle are not very independent of each other and that the struggle should be expanded together. An interviewee from Dev-Sağlık İş (Progressive Healthcare Workers Union) thought that there was a need for more interaction between the feminist movement and the labor movement in the struggle against both patriarchy and capitalism, and both parties had responsibilities:

In the unions, women are not only fighting against the bosses, but actually against power [in all its forms]. Feminist movement has a prominent slogan saying "No means no". The inability of a woman working in a workplace to say no to her boss becomes something we encounter in both [the case of] an engineer and a

cleaning worker without security. Because, the fear of being fired, the fear of relocation, etc., but male workers say this more easily. It actually adds new content to "No means no", turns it into a struggle headline. Therefore, if these powerful concepts in the feminist movement can be organized within the labor struggle as well, we can open a completely different chapter that strengthens the subjects of the field, that is, the women subjects of women's wage labor, and empowers the working class movement and the union movement as well if we turn these into tasks [to be fulfilled]. The disconnection in the relationship between the class movement and the women's movement is something dual. For example, the crisis of the unions, which were not able to put it before themselves to go on strike for the Istanbul Convention, is also the topic of the feminist movement and the women's movement, which is taking clumsy steps to empower women in poor neighborhoods or workplaces, in precarious working areas. We can only talk about their alliance if we can build a powerful piece of work concerning these areas. They are already getting closer politically because everybody is being proletarianized, everybody is getting poorer. Therefore, when we talk about the class movement, the women's movement is not even an alliance anymore, it actually is an essential element of the class movement. But this space, this distance in practice, can only be closed if a step is taken. Then we can actually talk about a real practical alliance. (Interview No: 19)

When we look at some suggestions regarding this relationship and empowering women workers in unions, the idea that the establishment of women's commissions is not enough because sometimes it is only for show, on paper, and that it needs to be embraced by organized women's movement for it to work effectively comes to the fore. A member of Dev-Turizm-İş (Progressive Tourism Workers Union) drew attention to the resilience of the patriarchal system and emphasized that women's organization in unions should be independent:

When we look at the history of feminist struggle, it has always been criticized by socialists as bourgeois ideology. This has been the case in the world as well as in Turkey (...) But as a socialist feminist, I believe that there is a patriarchal capitalist system, the struggle against capitalism and the struggle against patriarchy are of course intertwined because those systems are intertwined. However, since I do not believe, for example, that women were saved when socialism came, we need to have serious independent women's organizations both before and after that. There may be more ideological contact with the class struggle, but I think that it should not have an organizational hegemony (...) We should establish it in such a way that it will work independently. We have to find a way to do this. A male president shouldn't be able to come and grumble. That is, we have to organize it very well. So, I believe in full independence in women's struggle. If we can establish a fully independent commission, I think we should run it. (Interview Number: 21)

An interviewee also from the Purple List believed that women's commissions should be secured by statute and operate autonomously or independently, as well as operating with feminist consciousness:

The committees must be secured by the statute and have their own budget. Their decisions should not be advisory but binding for the entire organization. Then it works. It has to be binding, it has to be autonomous. We have established it, let's put it in the showcase, we also have women and LGBTI. This is not the issue. If you, as the administration of a tiny branch, decide on your own and appoint even the woman at the top of the [women's] committee, that's not a women's committee, it is something else. Even the fact that she has been appointed is a problem. Well, since the collective labor agreement says to establish a women's committee. They appoint women whom male executives can work comfortably with in order to keep up functionality. There must be women with a feminist consciousness. (Interview No: 14)

The interviewee from Genel-İş (Public Service Employees Union) also emphasized that the establishment of women's commissions by statute is not sufficient and that they must have a program. According to her, the commissions should work with the perspective of women's liberation ideology, the feminist

movement should be consulted while giving training or making the CLA, and feminists should put pressure on the unions, especially during processes of congress and statute change; but for this to happen, it was first necessary to change the idea of “women and men hand in hand” in the unions.

## **8. Conclusion and Recommendations**

With this research, we tried to convey the problems women experience in paid work, their experiences of organizing and resistance against patriarchy and capital, and how they experience unionization processes through their own narratives and perspectives. Although the interviews were limited to a certain number of participants and trade unions, we saw how common the problems are that women face both in paid and unpaid work and in organizing. Firstly, women are striving to work in a labor market divided along gender lines with low wages, under precarious conditions, and in circumstances of widespread harassment, sexism, and mobbing. While neoliberal attacks have already largely torn apart and disarranged the labor and the class, the paid workspace for women is in further disarray as a consequence of capital also putting patriarchal relations to work. For example, there are many problems such as women not being employed after a certain age, their being threatened with unemployment to prevent them from speaking up when they are harassed, women having to submit to all the bad conditions in order not to lose their jobs after a certain age, childcare center problem, women being looked down upon as unqualified workers.

Secondly, while the nature of employment in the sectors where women are concentrated presents a challenge before organizing from the very beginning, the classical unions' inability to develop an organizational line in keeping with the restructuring of the labor force and employment, new forms of working, and their remaining as male-dominated structures, their failure to take into account the work that women have to do at home and caregiving work make it more difficult for women workers to organize.

Women are able move only at a limited level within the ongoing male-dominant structures of the unions and can put forth their problems only to a certain extent when they unionize. The men in the union either block the women policies that women work to constitute within the union or keep them under control by trying to confine them to a certain level. While women's commissions or committees are the most important tools to ensure the active participation of women in the unions, it is seen that this still remains very limited or that it cannot become a basic/established element of the union, that is, it is subordinated. Although some of the independent unions have established women's commissions or declared gender equality in positive developments, it is yet unclear whether women are given priority. Therefore, even though independent unions display potential in terms of work on women's equality and freedom, it seems inevitable that they will fall into the situation of classical unions unless they make this into a fundamental element of their unions.

On the other hand, in spite of this negative picture, rising resistances and actions, the powerfully continuing struggle of women, the continuation of women's efforts to exist in unions despite everything, and feminist campaigns such as the Purple List that challenge the established patriarchal system in the unions also demonstrate women's acumen to organize as equals and give hope.

The question of what can be done necessitates reiterating the demands laid down in previous studies on this subject because it does not seem possible to say that there have been significant developments over

time. If we consider the feminist demands that have taken shape so far, together with the suggestions of the women we interviewed in this study, we can put forward the following solutions:

- Trade unions and the labor movement need to realize that women mostly work in non-organized small workplaces where temporary and informal work is high and to develop new organizing strategies. According to law, unregistered workers cannot become union members, but this has not prevented unions from engaging in this field and developing organizational strategies suitable for different working styles. It should be taken into account that women's workplaces are based in the house in many cases, with many women doing piecework from home for companies.
- Unions should also come up with discourse on the quality of women's employment. For example, unions should not organize on the assumption that all workers are oppressed equally while the distinction between women's work and men's work is so sharp in employment and while women, alongside this, are seen as a labor group with less bargaining power in many cases. The fact that women are confined into certain jobs and branches of work, that they receive lower wages than men, that in many cases they have to undertake a higher workload, that they can take place in paid work intermittently due to age discrimination, and that their rights to retirement are confiscated in this way should be a problem of the unions as well.
- Like many other studies, our study shows that women cannot take place in unions actively due to the burden of unpaid work and caregiving at home. Unless women free themselves of this burden, they will not be able to organize actively, and unless the unions can find a solution to this problem, they will continue to hold meetings and activities attended only by men. A solution to this can be a daycare center or a children's room in unions, at least so that members with children can attend meetings and other activities. However, meetings should be held at reasonable hours and effort should be made to enable the participation of women.
- In order for an established women's policy to take shape within the unions, structures such as commissions and committees should be secured by statute, women should have control over how they will operate them and men should not be allowed to interfere in their operation.
- It is necessary to continue to demand that the statutes be rewritten in a way that will include a declaration that the union is against discrimination based on gender and sexual orientation, that they will fight against this, that will include gender equality and women's issues – in view of the fact that these are not even a matter of discussion in most of the labor unions.
- In particular, the executive bodies of most of the unions affiliated to confederations are still entirely or largely made up of men. This is one of the biggest problems that needs to change in unions. Participation and representation of women of the union should be achieved and guaranteed in all divisions. Radical measures such as quotas, proportional representation and positive discrimination should not be avoided.
- More women specialists on organization should be employed.
- Some articles that will protect women's interests along with legal rights, such as equal pay for equal work and sanctions on men in case of violence against women, can be added to collective labor agreements. Imposing sanctions on male union members who commit crimes against women is one of the necessary steps to achieve gender equality. It should be ensured that articles related to women are determined by women in CLA processes.
- The signing of the ILO Convention No. 190 should be one of the agendas of the unions and a large-scale joint campaign should be created for its implementation.



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## Appendices

### Appendix 1: Branches of Activity Within the Scope of the Study

Branch of Activity	No of Registered Workers	Unionization Rate (%)	No of Member Workers Covered by CLA
Food Industry	632.059	11,72	18.538
Textile, Garment and Leather	1.167.918	8,80	28.799
Trade, Office, Education and Fine Arts	3.783.512	5,38	42.945
Metal	1.608.083	16,84	163.212
Energy	243.295	29,28	26.950
Healthcare and Social Services	514.059	14,50	11.781
Accommodation and Entertainment	931.257	3,89	5.928
Public Services	1.020.228	51,95	104.941

**Source:** Çalışma Hayatı İstatistikleri 2020 (Labor Statistics 2020), Çalışma ve Sosyal Güvenlik Bakanlığı (Ministry of Labor and Social Security)

### Appendix 2: Labor Unions Within the Scope of the Study

Name of Union	Branch of Activity Organized in	Confederation Affiliated to	No of Members*	Women's Commission/ Committee	CLA Authorization
Gıda-İş (Food Industry Workers Union)	Food industry	DİSK	1,745	No	No
Devrimci Tekstil İşçileri Sendikası (Dev Tekstil) (Revolutionary Textile Workers Union)	Textile, ready-made garment and leather industry	Independent	186	No	No
Tez Koop-İş (Trade, Office, Education and Fine Arts Workers Union)	Trade, office, education and fine arts	Türk-İş	111,829	No/has a women's magazine.	No
Birlik Sendikası (Unity Union)	Trade, office, education and fine arts	Independent	836	No	No
Özel Sektör Öğretmenleri Sendikası (Private Sector Teachers Union)	Trade, office, education and fine arts	Independent	2,214	Yes	No
Sosyal-İş (Social Security, Education, Office, Trade,	Trade, office, education and fine arts	DİSK	5.372	Yes	No

Cooperative and Fine Arts Workers Union)					
Birleşik Metal-İş (United Metal Workers Union)	Metal industry	DİSK	35.112	Yes	No
Tüm Otomotiv ve Metal İşçileri Sendikası (TOMİS) (All Automotive and Metal Workers Union)	Metal	Independent	107	No	No
Enerji-Sen (Energy Workers Union)	Energy	DİSK	2.624	No	Yes
Dev Sağlık-İş (Progressive Healthcare Workers Union)	Healthcare and social services	DİSK	3.480	No	No
Dev Turizm-İş (Progressive Tourism Workers Union)	Accommodation and entertainment	DİSK	1.309	No	No
Turizm, Eğlence ve Hizmet İşçileri Sendikası (TEHİS) (Tourism, Entertainment and Service Industry Workers Union)	Accommodation and entertainment	Independent	44	Yes	No
Genel-İş (Public Service Employees Union)	Public services	DİSK	126.802	No	Yes
İmece Ev İşçileri Sendikası (İmece Domestic Workers Union)	Public services	Independent	25	-	No

\*Number of union members is taken from the July 2022 statistics of the Ministry of Labor and Social Security.

### Appendix 3: Profiles of Interviewees

Interview No	Profession/Work	Union	Position in union
1	Market worker	Tez Koop-İş	Former member and workplace representative
2	Factory worker	TOMİS	Founding member and executive
3	Factory worker	Dev Tekstil	Secretary general
4	Market worker	Tez Koop-İş	Member

5	Civil engineer/Café-bar worker	TEHİS	Founding member and co-spokesperson
6	Unionist	Genel-İş	Branch chair
7	Unionist	Birleşik Metal-İş	Organizing specialist
8	Domestic worker	İmece Ev İşçileri Sendikası	Member
9	Domestic worker	İmece	Founding member
10	Domestic worker	İmece	Founding member and president
11	İSİG specialist (Occupational Health and Safety Council)	Birlik Sendikası	Executive
12	Software developer	Birlik Sendikası	Executive
13	Municipal worker	Genel-İş	Member
14	Municipal worker	Genel-İş	Member
15	Municipal worker	Genel-İş	Member
16	Office worker	Sosyal-İş	Executive
17	Unionist	Enerji-Sen	Organizing specialist
18	Unionist	Gıda-İş	Secretary general
19	Unionist	Dev-Sağlık İş	Organizing specialist
20	Healthcare worker	Dev-Sağlık İş	Member
21	Unionist	Dev-Turizm İş	Executive
22	Teacher	Öğretmen Sendikası	City representative