



## Challenges Faced By Female Chefs In Professional Kitchens

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### Abstract

This study examines the experiences of female chefs working in professional kitchens, focusing on gender-based discrimination, structural barriers, and cultural prejudices within a historically male-dominated kitchen culture. The study aims to identify the forms of direct, indirect, and structural discrimination encountered by female chefs and to analyse the strategies they employ to cope with these challenges. A qualitative literature review combined with a comparative analysis of national and international studies was employed as the research method. The findings reveal that female chefs face persistent barriers such as the glass ceiling, glass wall, glass cliff, and tokenism, which hinder their career development and professional recognition. However, the study also finds that resilience, leadership, and empathy enable female chefs to navigate these constraints and contribute positively to kitchen management practices. This research contributes academically by enriching gender studies in gastronomy and practically by highlighting the need for institutional and cultural transformation to support more equitable and sustainable professional kitchen environments.

**Keywords:** : Female Chefs; Professional Kitchen; Gender Inequality; Glass Ceiling; Workplace Discrimination.

### 1. Introduction

Gender roles are an important factor in determining individuals' positions and duties in society. Historically, these roles have directed women toward the private sphere – namely domestic activities – and defined them with characteristics such as “compassionate, gentle and supportive,” thereby confining them to unpaid domestic labour (Pekerşen, 2023; Temizkan & Gökğöz, 2023). Although women's participation in the labour force has increased over time, inequalities in professional life persist (Boztepe, 2022).

Professional kitchens are among the work environments where gender inequality is most visibly observed. Although cooking has historically been associated with women, professional kitchens have gradually become male-dominated spaces (Dağışan, 2021). In these environments, executive chef positions are largely occupied by men, while women are often pushed into lower-level roles or excluded altogether (İnce, 2016). Long working hours, heavy physical conditions and a highly competitive atmosphere are perceived as “men's work,” and the prejudice that women cannot adapt to this environment remains widespread (Temizkan & Gökğöz, 2023).

Female chefs face not only prejudices about being “physically inadequate” for certain tasks, but also problems such as wage inequality, discrimination in promotions, psychological harassment (mobbing), sexual harassment and exclusionary language (Boztepe, 2022; Dağışan, 2021). These issues negatively affect women's motivation and job satisfaction (İnce,



2016). However, research indicates that women are not less competent than men in the kitchen; on the contrary, they are often more disciplined, detail-oriented and creative. Therefore, gender-related problems in the kitchen must be addressed not only at the individual level but also at the organisational level (Pekerşen, 2023).

Although some studies in recent years have focused on the experiences of female chefs in Turkey (Dağışan, 2021; Temizkan & Gökgöz, 2023; Öztürk & Mutlu, 2022), there is still a limited number of works that examine the problems faced by women in professional kitchens from a holistic perspective. In this context, the present study seeks to fill this gap and provide a comprehensive overview of the issue.

This study aims to examine the forms of direct discrimination (e.g. mobbing, exclusion), indirect discrimination (e.g. barriers to promotion, unequal workload) and structural discrimination (e.g. glass ceiling, glass wall) experienced by female chefs working in professional kitchens, and to analyse how these barriers affect their career motivation, resilience and job performance.

The study also aims to reveal how female chefs, despite the challenges they face, become empowered, develop leadership styles and contribute to the formation of inclusive kitchen cultures. In this respect, male chefs' perspectives are also evaluated, and gender inequality is emphasised as a structural problem that affects not only women but the entire organisational culture.

This research seeks to make gender-based barriers in professional kitchens more visible, to raise awareness of these issues and to contribute to the development of organisational, managerial and legal solutions in the industry. Ultimately, the study aims to support women's equal, visible and sustainable participation in the field of gastronomy and to help promote an egalitarian work culture across the sector.

## 2. Literature Review

Sex refers to the biological differences between individuals, whereas gender denotes the socially constructed roles and expectations assigned to women and men (Akkaş, 2019; Tunca, 2021). From birth, individuals are guided to conform to specific behavioural patterns according to whether they are identified as girls or boys; women are associated with the "private sphere," while men are linked to the "public sphere." This social orientation restricts women's presence in the public sphere and limits their visibility (Demirgöz Bal, 2014).

Gender-based discrimination is clear in working life as well. Women are often employed in lower-level positions and face disadvantages in terms of promotion and pay. Male chefs tend to have stronger professional support networks, whereas long and flexible working hours and physically demanding conditions can make it difficult for women to advance in professional kitchens (Kabil, 2022; Dağışan, 2021). Family responsibilities may also hinder women's career progression. Employers may assume that women will eventually become mothers and leave work, thus disadvantaging them in promotion decisions, while male employees may resist sharing power (Alparslan et al., 2015). These attitudes can negatively impact women's motivation and productivity (Kabil, 2022).

Gender roles, as a product of the patriarchal system, limit women's equal access to education, economic opportunities and employment. Feminist theories have emerged in opposition to such inequalities. Liberal feminism argues that women should have equal rights and opportunities with men, whereas Marxist feminism criticises the association of women's labour with unpaid domestic work and care roles (Dağışan, 2021).

Recent global research on entrepreneurship highlights the importance of gender in service



sectors and its role in social sustainability (Elam et al., 2019; TFSN, 2019). In the context of women's entrepreneurship, individual attitudes and environmental conditions are key determinants; perceived capabilities positively affect entrepreneurial intentions, while fear of failure has a negative impact (Anggadwita & Dhewanto, 2016). These findings demonstrate that gender differences significantly shape many areas of working life. However, in the gastronomy sector, the barriers faced by female chefs and their coping strategies have not yet been examined comprehensively.

### 3. Method and Theory

#### 3.1 Method

This research was conducted using a qualitative literature review method. National and international academic literature on female chefs and gender inequality in professional kitchens was systematically reviewed. Relevant publications were selected from fields such as gastronomy, tourism, business administration, sociology and women's studies.

The review focused primarily on studies published in the last two decades (post-2000). In addition to research conducted in Turkey, key international studies were also included. The selected sources were subjected to comparative content and thematic analysis to identify common findings and differences. The information obtained was examined using descriptive analysis, and the problems experienced by female chefs as well as their coping strategies were classified under main themes. Although this method has certain limitations (for example, relying solely on existing literature restricts generalisation), it nevertheless provides a broad perspective and contributes to a holistic understanding of the topic.

#### 3.2 Theory

This study is grounded in gender and feminist theories. It adopts the view that gender is a social construct produced by society (Akkaş, 2019) and that patriarchal ideology creates the barriers faced by women (Tunca, 2021). In particular, the emphasis of liberal feminism on equal rights and opportunities for women and men, and the critique of Marxist feminism regarding the association of women's labour with the domestic sphere (Dağaşan, 2021), constitute the theoretical background of the study.

This framework provides a basis for understanding and interpreting the dynamics of gender inequality in professional kitchens. The experiences of female chefs and the obstacles they encounter are evaluated in light of gender roles and patriarchal structures, and proposed solutions are shaped through this perspective.

### 4. Results and Discussion

#### 4.1 Patriarchal Culture in Professional Kitchens

Compared to home kitchens, professional kitchens require greater variety of ingredients, creativity, aesthetic presentation and technical skills. They also involve a high level of attention, coordination and intense physical labour. The dishes prepared in these environments carry aesthetic and symbolic value beyond mere nutrition, while restaurants are perceived as prestigious venues due to their atmosphere and service quality (İnce, 2016). In hotel businesses, kitchens have transformed from simple production areas into management units that directly affect service quality. Increasing competition has made the professionalisation of kitchen management essential (Erdoğan, 2017).



With the rise of modern gastronomy, professional kitchens have become multidisciplinary production spaces in which hygiene, planning, aesthetics and managerial coordination intersect (Çifçi, 2019; Sever, 2021). Changing customer expectations require head chefs to possess leadership and visionary skills (Erdoğan, 2017).

The culture of professional kitchens has historically developed within a patriarchal structure. The association of long working hours, physical strength and the ability to remain calm under pressure with masculinity has reinforced the perception that kitchens are more suitable workplaces for men. Women, by contrast, have traditionally been associated with the home kitchen and defined through caring and emotionally supportive roles (Druckman, 2010). Associating leadership and mastery positions with male-coded behaviours means that when women adopt assertive or authoritative attitudes in these roles, they are often met with negative reactions, which in turn hinders their progression into managerial positions (Druckman, 2010; Hartke, 2018).

The rigid hierarchical structure of professional kitchens is a product of class-based societies and the historical development of Western culinary culture. In ancient times, cooks in royal courts were predominantly men; in the 14th and 15th centuries, male cooks serving in the military laid the foundations of today's professional kitchen hierarchies. While "professionalism" came to be defined as paid work requiring expertise and skill, men were associated with productivity and the building of civilisation; women's cooking was mostly seen as unpaid, pleasure-based domestic labour (Druckman, 2010).

Throughout history, women have played key roles in production and household economies, yet their labour has largely remained invisible. With the transition to settled life, women's roles in production increased, but the transfer of property rights to men institutionalised the patriarchal order and devalued women's labour (Pekerşen, 2023). During the Middle Ages, kitchens became private spaces of the nobility; with the Industrial Revolution, they gained a commercial dimension and the modern professional kitchen emerged. In this period, women entered the paid workforce, but their work was mostly classified as "unskilled" (Kaya, 2023).

There are also initiatives that support the professional development and visibility of female chefs. Organisations such as the James Beard Foundation, Women Chefs & Restaurateurs (WCR) and Les Dames d'Escoffier, as well as local programmes like the Women Chefs of Kentucky initiative, provide mentorship and networking opportunities for women, helping them strengthen their position in the sector (Hartke, 2018; Weaver, 2018).

## 4.2 Structural Barriers Faced by Women in Professional Kitchens

Women encounter various psychological and structural barriers in professional life. One such barrier is mobbing, defined as systematic psychological harassment directed at specific individuals in the workplace. In cases of mobbing, women may experience behaviours such as humiliation, isolation and excessive supervision, resulting in problems such as loss of self-confidence, burnout and reduced job satisfaction (Leymann, 1996; Yardım, 2023; Tunca, 2021). Studies show that women are disproportionately affected by mobbing, for example by not receiving sufficient support at work, being excluded during motherhood or being subjected to sexual harassment (Yardım, 2023; Öçalır, 2017; Tunca, 2021).

The glass ceiling syndrome refers to invisible structural barriers that prevent women from advancing to upper-level positions (Erkılınç, 2011). These barriers are sustained by



patriarchal organisational cultures, sexist prejudices and, at times, women's own internalised self-limitations (Yıldız et al., 2016; Boztepe, 2022). Mentorship, leadership training and institutional support play key roles in overcoming the glass ceiling (Erkılınç, 2011; Öçalır, 2017). At the individual level, a lack of self-confidence, feelings of hopelessness and perfectionist attitudes can cause women to hold themselves back at work. The burden of family responsibilities leads to a loss of time and energy, slowing women's career progression (Boztepe, 2022; Yıldız et al., 2016).

At the organisational level, employers' attitudes towards female employees are crucial in the formation of the glass ceiling. The lack of encouragement, exclusion from promotion processes or removal from decision-making mechanisms all reveal the existence of a glass ceiling within the institution (Tunca, 2021; Boztepe, 2022; Yıldız et al., 2016).

The glass wall syndrome describes barriers that restrict women's entry into certain sectors or departments. While the glass ceiling hinders upward progression, the glass wall prevents women from entering particular occupational fields from the outset (Boztepe, 2022). In the glass cliff syndrome, women are appointed to risky leadership positions during times of crisis and later blamed for unsuccessful outcomes (Yıldız et al., 2016).

The queen bee syndrome describes senior women who adopt distant and competitive attitudes towards other women. This behaviour may stem from attempts to adapt to male-dominated cultures and often weakens solidarity among women (Derks et al., 2016; Tunca, 2021). Tokenism refers to the symbolic inclusion of women in organisations without genuine power-sharing. In such cases, women may be excluded from decision-making processes and feel pressure as the "representative" of their gender, which can lead to emotional exhaustion (Kanter, 1977; Kanbur, 2023; Tunca, 2021).

In summary, structural barriers such as mobbing, the glass ceiling, glass wall, glass cliff, queen bee syndrome and tokenism reveal different dimensions of gender inequality in professional life. These mechanisms point to the need for profound organisational transformation in workplaces, including professional kitchens (Yıldız et al., 2016; Boztepe, 2022).

### 4.3 The Social Function and Ideological Role of the Media

The media is a powerful mechanism that plays a key role in the construction of social reality and encompasses communication tools such as television, newspapers and the internet. It shapes how large audiences perceive the world and helps set the public agenda by influencing which issues are considered important (Avcı & Güdekli, 2018; Öztürk & Mutlu, 2022). In this respect, the media is a decisive actor in the reproduction of social values and norms (Tufan-Tanrıöver, 2000). Media messages also play a significant role in reinforcing gender roles. At the same time, when used ethically, the media has the potential to make social problems visible, raise awareness and strengthen demands for change (Avcı & Güdekli, 2018).

### 4.4 Representation of Female Chefs in the Media: Professional Kitchens in the Shadow of Patriarchal Structures

Media representations of the chef profession are mostly constructed around male figures. In the media, the image of the "chef" is typically presented as an "authoritative, dominant and charismatic" man, whereas female chefs are either rendered invisible or portrayed in line with traditional gender roles. Even successful women are frequently depicted as "exceptions," which undermines female authority in professional kitchens



(Druckman, 2010; İnce, 2016).

Media narratives often associate male chefs with ambition and career success (e.g. the pursuit of Michelin stars), while female chefs' professional satisfaction is linked to family life or emotional fulfilment. Thus, popular culture reproduces patriarchal discourses that redirect women back to the private sphere (İnce, 2016).

In many films, female chef characters are surrounded by family responsibilities or positioned as dependent on male approval. For instance, in the film *Aşk Tarifi* (No Reservations / Recipe for Love), the main character Kate is portrayed as a successful and disciplined female chef; however, her struggle between motherhood and work ultimately leads to a message that she should retreat into the private sphere. This narrative illustrates how patriarchy directs women toward home-centred roles (İnce, 2016).

Similarly, in *Sarayın Tatlari* (Haute Cuisine), Madame Laborie is appointed as the chef of the Élysée Palace but is marginalised by her male colleagues and devalued for defending a traditional approach to cuisine. The male chefs' exclamation "We won, gentlemen!" symbolically reflects the male-dominated structure of professional kitchens (İnce, 2016). In such examples, women's professional achievements are overshadowed; their independence is perceived as a threat or their success is framed as legitimate only through male approval.

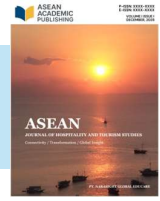
In summary, while male chefs in media representations are associated with professional ambition and success, the achievements of female chefs are often interpreted through emotional or familial roles. These representations reinforce gender-stereotypical narratives and obscure the professional status of female chefs (İnce, 2016). The portrayal of female chefs in the media thus reflects the cultural dimension of gender inequality in professional kitchens and makes it difficult for wider society to fully understand the challenges women face. Consequently, media-shaped perceptions mirror the broader social reflections of the problems addressed in this study and underscore the need for gender equality in gastronomy.

## 5. Conclusion

This study reveals the gender-based barriers, cultural patterns and structural inequalities faced by female chefs working in professional kitchens. The findings show that professional kitchen culture has been historically shaped by a male-dominated structure, which still restricts women's career progression today. From recruitment to promotion processes, female chefs encounter invisible barriers such as the glass ceiling, glass wall, glass cliff and tokenism, and are exposed to psycho-social risks including mobbing, exclusion and verbal or physical harassment. These conditions negatively affect women's professional motivation and job satisfaction and may lead them to leave the sector.

At the same time, the study demonstrates that female chefs develop strong resilience strategies in the face of these challenges. Through collaborative management styles, empathy-based leadership approaches and an emphasis on creativity, women bring new and enriching perspectives to professional kitchens. Thus, the presence of women in kitchen culture is critically important not only for gender equality but also for the sustainable development of the gastronomy sector.

Achieving gender equality in the sector requires institutional and cultural transformation rather than solely individual efforts. Accordingly, businesses' human resource policies should be redesigned to provide equal opportunities for women in recruitment and promotion. Mentorship programmes, career development training and awareness-raising workshops



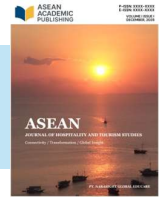
should be expanded to strengthen female chefs' leadership roles. In addition, ethical codes and monitoring mechanisms should be implemented in kitchen environments to prevent sexist language and mobbing.

In the academic realm, an increase in gender-focused studies in the gastronomy sector will enhance the visibility and representational power of female chefs. Research that examines male chefs' perspectives and their role in reconstructing organisational culture will contribute to the development of a more inclusive kitchen culture.

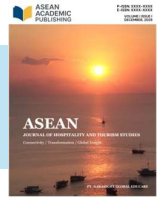
In conclusion, the achievement of gender equality in professional kitchens is a shared responsibility of all stakeholders in the sector and cannot be left solely to women's struggle. The professional resilience, leadership potential and creativity of female chefs are powerful dynamics that can drive the transformation of entrenched norms in gastronomy. Supporting this transformation will not only increase the efficiency and innovativeness of the sector but also contribute to establishing a more just and egalitarian work culture at the societal level.

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