

The Precarization of NGO Employment and the Coping Strategies

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Abstract: This study examines the work experiences of professional middle-class employees in humanitarian aid NGOs, drawing on data from a field study conducted in Türkiye. It advances two interrelated lines of analysis. First, it analyzes the strategies developed by humanitarian aid employees to cope with various dimensions of precarization—such as job insecurity, wage pressure, and intense and exhausting labour processes—as well as the limits of these strategies. Second, it explores how dimensions specific to humanitarian aid employment, including social motivation, job satisfaction, and emotional rewards, interact with and shape experiences of precarization. Overall, the study shows that humanitarian aid employees, on the one hand, normalise and adapt to the precariousness

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embedded in their working conditions; on the other hand, as this same process erodes the social and emotional significance they attach to their work, it fosters increasing alienation from the sector.

Keywords: NGO Employment, Professional Middle Classes, Precarization

STK İstihdamının Prekarizasyonu ve Başetme Stratejileri

Öz: Bu çalışma, Türkiye’de yürütülen bir saha araştırmasından elde edilen verilere dayanarak, insani yardım STK’larında çalışan profesyonel orta sınıf çalışanların iş deneyimlerini incelemektedir. Çalışma, birbiriyle ilişkili iki analiz eksenini ortaya koymaktadır. İlk olarak, insani yardım çalışanlarının iş güvencesizliği, ücret baskısı ve yoğun ve yorucu çalışma süreçleri gibi güvencesizleşmenin çeşitli boyutlarıyla başetmek için geliştirdikleri stratejileri ve bu stratejilerin sınırlarını analiz etmektedir. İkinci olarak, sosyal motivasyon, iş tatmini ve duygusal ödül gibi insani yardım istihdamına özgü boyutların, güvencesizlik deneyimleriyle nasıl etkileşime girdiğini ve bu deneyimleri nasıl şekillendirdiğini araştırmaktadır. Çalışma, insani yardım çalışanlarının bir yandan çalışma koşullarına yerleşik güvencesizliği normalleştirdiklerini ve buna uyum sağladıklarını; diğer yandan ise, bu sürecin işlerine atfettikleri sosyal ve duygusal önemi aşındırması nedeniyle, sektörden giderek daha fazla uzaklaşmalarına neden olduğunu göstermektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: STK İstihdamı, Profesyonel Orta Sınıflar, Prekarizasyon

Introduction

As Kalleberg and Vallas (2018: 1) suggest the notion of precarious work describes the contemporary organization of work “that is uncertain, unstable, and insecure and in which employees bear the risks of work (as opposed to businesses or the government) and receive limited social benefits and statutory protections.” Thus, precarization refers to the processes that lead to the erosion and eventual dissolution of contractual protections in various domains, including employment stability, adequate income, opportunities for professional advancement, and the assurance of retirement security. Although precarization was initially discussed in relation to the employment and working conditions of blue-collar workers or unskilled laborers, subsequent analyses have also encompassed the transformations observed in professional occupations within this framework. As Styhre (2017: 31) states,

In investor capitalism, professional work is no longer a privileged, elite work domain of expertise, protected from market assessment, but instead become a form of 'expert labor' or 'knowledge work' with no particular differences vis-à-vis, e.g., blue-collar or white-collar work. In investor capitalism, professional work to some extent is 'deconsecrated,' losing some of its halo as prestigious expertise worthy of respect or even veneration.

Considering this overarching trend, this paper presents the findings of research conducted by the authors among employees of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) operating in Türkiye, particularly those employed in the humanitarian aid sector. Our objective is not to engage in a debate regarding the classification of humanitarian aid employees' class position. While the subsequent discussion indicates the structural transformations that have significantly impacted on the working conditions of this group, the subjectivity-focused nature of our field research does not provide a solid foundation for asserting claims about the class relations that are developing within this newly established structural context. Consequently, our focus is on how its members subjectively position themselves within the process of precarization, which we conceptualize as a prevailing tendency. Thus, drawing upon themes such as professionalization, bureaucratization, gender, organizational behavior, intrinsic motivation and emotional reward, we developed a set of research questions that focus on the following:

- the dynamics and mechanisms that influence NGO employees' acceptance of their working conditions and their associated coping strategies;
- the ways in which NGO employees interpret and make sense of their work in light of the precarious and demanding nature of their work, as well as the limitations of these interpretations.

The first section develops the historical and conceptual background and methodological issues for field research. The remaining sections present an overview of our research findings on the work experiences, gender perspectives, and coping strategies of NGO employees in Türkiye. A discussion based on the findings is conducted in the conclusion section.

Background, Context and Method

Although NGOs wield considerable influence in development, human rights, and environmental governance, the conditions of labor within these organizations have received insufficient attention in the pertinent academic literature. Existing scholarship tends either to illuminate the processes of NGO professionalization -

examining the emergence of distinct organizational logics and bureaucratic structures- (cf. Joachim and Schneiker, 2018; Eagleton-Pierce, 2020; Kutay, 2021) or focus on the effects of NGO work on civil or political domains (Kuzmanovic, 2012; Mühlenhoff, 2015; İsmail and Kamat, 2018). A limited number of academic studies have examined the working conditions of employees in NGOs (see Akyüz 2010; Baker 2014; Pascucci 2019; Mikolajczak 2021a, 2021b, 2022; Mer and Viridi 2021).

Yet, employment in the so-called third sector has increased significantly on a global scale. For instance, in Türkiye, where the field research for this study was conducted, the so-called “civil society sector” has exhibited sustained growth in recent years. According to the official statistics, in Türkiye, where the NGOs are officially registered as associations and foundations, in 2006, the number of full-time employees in associations was 3,943, while in 2020 this figure rose to 41,189. In 2006, the number of part-time employees was 616, increasing to 4,194 in 2020. Similarly, the number of project-based employees in associations, which was 542 in 2006, rose to 32,554 in 2020 (Kap, 2021).

Civil society emerged as a concept that gained prominence in academic, intellectual, and political discourses during the 1980s and 90s, as part of a broader wave of skepticism towards the state (Keane, 1988; Norton 1994, 1995). During this period, civil society was positioned as the locus of autonomous and voluntary initiative, standing in opposition to the state, which was perceived as the common denominator of actually-existing socialist regimes, bureaucratic Keynesian systems, and regimes such as that of Turkey, where the military and bureaucracy played a dominant role in governance. Within this intellectual framework, NGOs were considered as institutions rooted in grassroots organizing, voluntary initiative, and participation, in contrast to coercive or bureaucratic modes of governance (Clarke, 1998). However, the development of these institutions followed a distinct trajectory. In the Turkish context (Keyman and İçduygu, 2003), the 1999 earthquake is regarded as a pivotal moment in the transformation of NGOs (İlik, 2000). Their extensive mobilization in the aftermath of the earthquake was instrumental in securing their public legitimacy. Consistent with the process initiated in that same year by Turkey's acceptance as a candidate for European Union membership, a 2004 amendment to the Law on Associations introduced legislative changes that enabled NGOs to access international funding and participate in international projects. In this manner, NGOs in Turkey became part of a transformation that was, in fact, unfolding globally.

At the core of this transformation lies the increasing dependence of NGOs' operations on funding provided by international donors. This financial dependency fundamentally altered the internal structures and functioning of NGOs in a managerial way (Roberts et al, 2005; Ebrahim, 2003). Donors stipulated specific

institutional forms as a condition for the provision of funds and imposed internal oversight mechanisms governing the allocation and utilization of those funds. Consequently, this led to a bureaucratic transformation of the division of labor within NGOs. As a result, rather than the voluntary activism anticipated in the 1980s and 1990s, NGOs evolved into a sector characterized by salaried professional staff operating within a bureaucratically compartmentalized office environment, distinguished by a distinct managerial stratum.

This transformation encompasses two fundamental elements that have triggered the precarization of working conditions. First, due to the competition that arises among local NGOs for the allocation of these funds, the relationship between international donors and the local NGOs receiving financial assistance can, in certain instances, resemble a form of “subcontractor bargaining.” As one of the interviewees articulated this mechanism as follows:

When a donor sits at the table with our program team, they say, “We are very pleased to work with you. We get very good results. You always hit the targets. Your reporting is wonderful. But your charge is very high.” Now, for the qualified work mentioned to be done, it is inevitable for that fee to be high. But another institution enters the job saying, “I can do this with ten people.” However, they make everyone passing through the door sign as a beneficiary. Since you give ten thousand lira to the field worker, that field worker is then forced to reach twenty beneficiaries a week. They set the target high. Normally, if your field worker is doing case tracking, for example, doing even two case tracks a day is overwhelming. Then, you start doing what you would normally do two of a day as four or five a day for that ten thousand lira. I mean, the obligation to work this much turns into a kind of exploitation. (Interviewee 7)

The second mechanism contributing to precarious employment conditions within NGOs is the prevalence of project-based work, which has spread across diverse domains—extending from public services to academia and the sphere of artistic production (Greer et al., 2018; Baker, 2014; Jalocha, 2018; Ana, 2024: 257-286; Szreder 2021). Projectification refers to the modern trend in organizational work structures whereby activities historically regulated by bureaucratic routines are now reconfigured as discrete, time-bound projects. These projects require independent funding, clearly articulated objectives, established timelines, evaluation and accountability frameworks, and performance indicators, all of which considerably alter the conditions of work.

Empirical studies on precarization primarily focus on occupations within the knowledge economy and among creative professionals (Doshi et al., 2025: 225). This includes performing artists, actors, and musicians (Umney and Krestos, 2015; Alacovska, 2018; Butler and Russell, 2018), journalism (Springer and Rick, 2025), and academy (Gill, 2014; Rodriguez et al., 2024). A commonality among these professions is their practice outside the classical office or workplace discipline, and their reliance heavily on the creative labor of the practitioner. Thus, some scholarly works suggest that individuals engaged in creative fields or cognitive sectors perceive their experiences of precarization as liberating from specific aspects of the existing work regime (see Armano and Murgia, 2017; Umney and Krestos, 2015). This is not applicable in the NGO sector. The labor regime in this field—except during the COVID period and the subsequent phase of home-based work—continues to rely on conventional office- or field-based work organized around fixed working hours.

Besides, humanitarian aid represents a sector in which practices of managerialization have been significantly effective for an extended period, driven by the increasing determinacy of international donors who provide substantial funding. The transformation of work in NGOs has been driven primarily by the process of projectification. Within NGO contexts, project-based employment is characterized by fixed-term contracts linked to specific funding cycles, resulting in precarity that is evident in the periodic renewal of contracts, which depend more on donor decisions than on organizational planning or employee performance. The temporal constraints imposed by funding cycles create a cyclical pattern of labor demand characterized by expansion and contraction. The lack of systematic workforce planning exacerbates job insecurity, which is defined as the absence of stability and predictability in employment (Shoss, 2017: 1912). NGOs frequently prioritize mission-driven flexibility over the continuity of human resources, resulting in ad hoc staffing decisions and a tendency towards reactive rather than proactive personnel management. Besides, stratification among employees based on seniority, specialization, and donor-driven roles fosters competition for scarce positions, increasing the likelihood of arbitrary contract non-renewals and layoffs (Lloyd-Walker et al., 2018). These challenges contribute to instability and uncertainty concerning future employment prospects, thereby undermining the potential for long-term career planning (Greer et al., 2018) and fostering uncertain employment conditions and career trajectories (Mikołajczak, 2021a). It is also posited that project-based work contributes to heightened levels of chronic stress mainly due to the work overload (Cicmil et al., 2016; Velasco and Wald, 2022). Short-term projects impose acute deadlines, thereby accelerate work rhythms and intensify stress. To cite Delisle's words, the amount of work required for the projects "can place a significant

amount of stress on the people involved, which can lead to burn-out, family problems, or simply long hours at work” (Delisle, 2020).

Two main approaches are recognized as distinct within the field of precarization research. The first approach emphasizes the new conditions of work mentioned above and highlights the socio-economic transformations (see Kalleberg and Vallas, 2018), while the second situates precarization within a broader social context, concentrating on the experiences that contribute to a distinct form of subjectification. Studies in this second line examining strategies for coping with precarization, as well as the interactions between the process of precarization and the meanings ascribed to work alongside various forms of subjectivity, have led to the emergence of what can be characterized in the literature as a 'subjectivist turn' (see Armano and Murgia 2017; Armano et al., 2022; Valenzuela et al., 2024). In this work, alongside the considerations of the second approach, we will mainly focus on the coping strategies and adaptations of NGO workers to these conditions, the limitations inherent in these adaptive strategies, and the conflicts that emerge because of this process. Coping and adaptation strategies refer to the mechanisms that employees employ individually rather than relying on collective organizing in response to challenges encountered during the precarization of their jobs. We propose that analyses of these mechanisms within occupational contexts may provide valuable insights into the class consciousness and reflexive behaviors of the professional middle classes, thereby generating significant research agendas concerning this class segment. The strategies of coping and adaptation employed by middle-class professionals in response to the precarization they experience, as well as the limitations inherent in these strategies, are essential for comprehending their perceptions and practices of distinction and, ultimately, their “failure of distinction.”

Two assumptions guided our decision to select the humanitarian aid sector as the focus of such a study. First, while NGO work in the humanitarian aid sector is characterized by a high degree of professionalization, it is highly possible that most employees continue to maintain a strong sense of social responsibility. Thus, humanitarian aid has the potential of representing a domain where social responsibility and professionalism converge for a substantial number of employees. This interplay enhances the emotional reward and satisfaction derived from employment in the civil society sector, positioning it as distinct within the broader workforce (see Anheier et al., 2003; Rose-Ackerman, 1996; Benz, 2005; Akyüz, 2010: 102–135; Kan, 2020: 32–36; Güner, 2019: 286–88). Second, the humanitarian field is one towards which international private and public funding flows to a high degree. Some USD 41.4 billion was directed to this field in 2021, USD 47.5 billion in 2022, and USD 47.4 billion in 2023. Following the disruption

of USAID funding under the Trump administration in the United States, this figure fell to USD 41.5 billion in 2024 and, in a record decline, to USD 33.3 billion in 2025 (ALNAP, 2026: 31). Considerably higher than the funding directed at other domains of civil society, these figures also point to the managerial professionalization of the NGOs operating in this field. Thus, we assumed that contradictions would be particularly evident in the humanitarian aid sector, where the highest levels of international funding have encouraged managerial modes of governance, while employees continue to draw upon ideals of social responsibility and expectations of emotional engagement. Thus, the NGO employees in the humanitarian aid sector, who straddle the boundary between altruistic mission and market-style management, represent a unique field for understanding the precarization of middle-class professional jobs in general.

During the course of the project, in-depth interviews were conducted with 48 humanitarian aid NGO staff members from January to December 2023. Twenty-two interviewees were employed in Türkiye-based NGOs with a minimum of seven field offices; nineteen were employed in Türkiye-based NGOs with six or fewer field offices; four were affiliated with international NGOs that maintain official representations in Türkiye; and three interviewees were unemployed at the time of the interview. Of the interviewees, 20 were men and 28 were women. Looking at their work histories, 18 had ten years or more of professional experience, while 30 had fewer than ten years. Each interview lasted between 40 and 90 minutes. All sessions were audio recorded and later transcribed. A thematic analysis approach was applied to the transcripts: patterns in the data were identified, a set of themes was developed and analyzed, and the findings were situated in relation to existing literature (Guest et al., 2012). To emphasize the subjective experiences, we made a concerted effort to incorporate a substantial portion of the interviewees' own language within the text. We believe this approach more effectively conveys the experiences, mental and emotional formation of NGO employees.

Findings of the Field Research

NGO employment is a typical professional middle-class occupation, where almost all employees are university graduates, the division of labor is departmentalized according to different areas of expertise, the daily workflow is dictated by project-based tasks, a technical language emerges, characterized by the frequent interspersions of English terminology within Turkish sentences. Despite this distinct character, the NGO employees we interviewed gave quite different answers when defining their own professional or class positions. Some of these

were distinct but clear definitions such as “white-collar,” “middle class,” or “worker”:

...because I know a bit more about what to do and how to do it in my specific field, and because I work on such a system, I actually view myself directly as white-collar. (Interviewee 9)

Typical middle class, actually. We occupy a white-collar middle-class status. [...] I mean, this is a class that can go to two extremes. On one hand, depending on your intellectual level, and management capacity, you are in a different position. On the other hand, you are in a position closer to the petty bourgeoisie, constantly carrying anxieties about life. (Interviewee 21)

I am definitely a worker... Like, really... I get uncomfortable when people call me white-collar. I am a worker. Because I have no difference from a worker. Actually no, workers are more secure than me. Blue-collar workers work with more security than I do. Look, unionized ones can get paid for overtime; we don't have that. (Interviewee 18)

I am clearly a worker. I don't define myself as white-collar. Looking at my current living conditions, this feels like being worker to me. [...] White-collar means not looking at the bill beforehand when sitting in a venue, or saying “I go out once in a blue moon, let me not look at the menu price” when ordering something. Therefore, I never see myself as white-collar. (Interviewee 29)

The distinct yet varying responses indicated a lack of consensus regarding class and status positions among the NGO employees interviewed. Notably, the more intriguing majority group comprised individuals who articulated their class and status positions in more ambiguous terms, fluctuating between white-collar and worker status:

I am a white-collar worker. (Interviewee 13)

By virtue of the position I work in, I am white-collar. Frankly, I feel a bit like a worker... partly because our working conditions are heavy, I can classify myself a bit as a worker. (Interviewee 39)

I think I am a worker, I work in an NGO and it's like being a worker, so there is that side to it. If not for that, thinking of other factors, I still think I am a worker. I am not a middle class either. I would say I'm somewhere in between the middle and the worker. (Interviewee 48)

There are some aspects of this work that don't quite overlap with the white-collar workers in the private sector... For example, today I am a project manager. But at the same time, when toilets and showers arrive at the field today, I am in the field for installation. (Interviewee 32)

I actually see myself as a white-collar worker working on a construction site. (Interviewee 33)

I mean, many points look like a worker to me, but among us, it's spoken of as white-collar. But I express this with the awareness that the white collars are also workers. (Interviewee 34)

I can say a worker-weighted professional. (Interviewee 44)

These self-definitions are noteworthy as they indicate that NGO employees possess a significant awareness of their own downward mobilization regarding their class and social positions. The processes of precarization experienced in many professional occupations take on a multi-faceted dimension in NGOs. While these institutions were once regarded as the bastions of civic values such as volunteerism and grassroots participation, they are undergoing a transformation into a highly institutionalized sector characterized by significant precarity and demanding work practices. Conversely, this sector continues to serve as a significant field of employment for a specific subset of the population that seeks to derive meaning beyond the mere necessity of securing a livelihood. Consequently, NGOs represent a valuable area of inquiry for investigating both the processes of precarization and the concurrent desire to transcend this trend within the context of work practices of middle-class professionals.

Precarious Working Conditions and Sector-Specific Coping Strategies

This section examines three principal problems relating to working conditions in the NGO sector that emerged from our fieldwork: job insecurity, inadequate remuneration, and the specific challenges faced by women workers, particularly in field-based roles. It further analyses the coping and compensatory mechanisms that workers have developed in response. These issues are treated separately because they give rise to strategies that are distinctive to the sector, shaped by the particular conditions under which NGO employees work.

Employment insecurity emerged as the most significant issue in the interviews conducted. The primary cause of employment insecurity within NGOs is their reliance on funding from international donors. Employee salaries are derived from these financial resources, and when a project concludes or the NGO

is unable to sustain funding at previous levels, certain employees face unemployment. This circumstance has been observed to induce a considerable state of anxiety among many employees.

...this creates serious tension: Now this project is ending. Will I stay? Will I go?.. and you wait with tremendous tension. We experienced this just past December. We went into downsizing, and suddenly sixty people had to be laid off. (Interviewee 7)

Like the private sector, you have to live without being able to make very long-term plans, and you always need to have a Plan B. The project can end at any moment, and you can be left unemployed. That's why you need a plan. (Interviewee 44)

The cycles of growth and contraction frequently observed in NGOs are largely contingent upon the rapid reallocation of financial resources, particularly within the humanitarian aid sector. As disasters that yield widespread impacts, such as earthquakes, armed conflicts, and mass migration, alter their geographic focus, so too do international funding streams. Additionally, the absence of strategic planning within NGOs exacerbates these fluctuations. The phenomenon of "unplanned growth" in NGOs was highlighted by several interviewees during the research.

Since 2011, a crisis comes every two years. The last crisis was in 2019. That day the management said, "those who get their severance pay can leave. We are in a crisis again. Therefore, we cannot sustain it. This foundation doesn't proceed like this. We will downsize." Then things get back on track. The Euro spikes, the Dollar spikes. A social incident happens, donations increase. This time it is said, "come on, let's expand, let's grow. Let's reach more places," etc... In the last disaster, budgetary possibilities expanded greatly. But we feel insecure. Maybe after a while, they will say again, "those who get their severance pay can go." (Interviewee 34)

Not all positions within NGOs exhibit the same degree of job insecurity. In this context, a fundamental distinction exists between employees with technical and professional competencies, such as monitoring and evaluation as well as financial management, and those engaged in fieldwork.

If you work in a technical department, for example, if you are a financier, your probability of being laid off is lower. Because even if a project ends, another project actually continues. Since your professional experience is

needed for that project as well, you somehow continue to stay. Therefore, unfortunately, it is not equal for everyone... I think the most insecure ones are likely the field workers. (Interviewee 14)

The rights of field teams and office teams have started to differentiate from each other. While teams working in the field work on more slippery ground and more precariously, efforts are made to keep office employees secure by covering their budgets with funds from other projects. At the slightest downsizing, friends in the field cannot continue in the project. (Interviewee 4)

Although these operational dynamics within the sector lead to arbitrary dismissals and the erosion of employees' rights, recourse to legal action is not a prevalent practice NGO employees. Some interviewees noted that employees within this sector often lack awareness of their rights, and even when they possess such knowledge, they frequently refrain from taking action (Interviewee 6). Despite the observed increase in the number of employees seeking recourse through the judiciary or unions in response to rights violations, the prevailing behavioral norm within the sector remains one of resignation and adaptation to the established operational frameworks:

In the private sector, yes, if an employee has a problem regarding their legal rights, they go to court. We can go here too. There are those who go. But not many in number. Because at some point, it is also related to a bit of awareness. Meaning, they are already convinced that they are working project-based and will leave when the project contract expires. (Interviewee 4)

Employment insecurity, while experienced to varying degrees, is largely regarded as the normative condition within this sector. Despite being a source of anxiety and dissatisfaction, there is seldom an expectation or proposal for change regarding this situation. While two interviewees (Interviewees 14 and 26) suggested alternative approaches, such as establishing reserve resources to enhance job security in NGOs through private or public funding, the majority have normalized the prevailing precarious work regime in these organizations. Indeed, some interviewees not only accepted this operational model but also considered it to be a professionally acceptable standard.

The mechanism at work in this context is the tendency to remain within the sector. The high rate of horizontal mobility within the sector serves as a buffering mechanism that mitigates insecurity. Numerous interviewees indicated that an employee who loses their position at one NGO has a considerable likelihood of

securing employment with another project or NGO. Employees—albeit not necessarily within the same organization—are generally able to obtain a position at a different NGO after a brief period of unemployment, thereby remaining within the sector. Some interviewees elaborated on this characteristic of the sector from a macro perspective:

Most stay within the sector. Because those who want to get out of the sector don't prefer this sector anyway... You try to articulate into a project somewhere else and you probably manage it. It seems the sector has formed such a capacity. But you stay unemployed for four months, five months, three months, two months in between. (Interviewee 22)

The refugee crises or migrant crises are not something that will ever end in the world; on the contrary, we will witness more and more of them. The consumption of resources, their usage, distribution, and the climate crisis, etc., lead to this. There is an increasing migration movement in the world due to many reasons that will arise before us. At this point, countries and the United Nations always have to allocate resources. There is a pie here. If you take responsibility in this field or do the work lovingly, and if you can add something, there is no possibility of you remaining unemployed. Today it is this NGO; tomorrow it will be another NGO. (Interviewee 17)

We observed that wages represent another subject in which intra-sector mobility serves a distinct compensatory role. Upon investigating the satisfaction levels related to wages within this precarious labor sector, some interviewees indicated that their wage levels were satisfactory and expressed no grievances regarding this issue. In contrast, others reported a substantial decline in their quality of life, attributing this deterioration to the recent high inflation experienced in Türkiye.

I have felt it very much in the last two years. When I first started work, I was at a point closer to Türkiye's standards; I was working above minimum wage. But for the last two years, I have felt it very deeply. (Interviewee 29)

Basic human living conditions—I'm not even talking about luxury. Creating basic human living conditions, etc. We experience situations where we have to rent a house with two or three people, like students. (Interviewee 34)

I am no longer middle class. The economic fluctuation and high inflation in Türkiye caused the middle class to slide a lot. I am actually in that sliding class. (Interviewee 42)

At this point, a form of horizontal mobility within the humanitarian aid sector, characterized by higher wages, becomes salient. This mechanism operates in relation to the wage disparity between local NGOs and international INGOs. Employment at the local branches of INGOs, which function on a global scale, results in an enhancement of wage levels. The comparatively high remuneration offered by these institutions, particularly when disbursed in foreign currencies such as dollars or euros, appears to have engendered a significant divide within the humanitarian aid sector. A pronounced wage differential has emerged between employees of local NGOs and those affiliated with INGOs, despite the fact that they often operate under essentially similar conditions. This wage disparity is most evident among individuals working in the same field, frequently in close proximity, yet representing different organizations. Consequently, the economic pressures experienced within the sector have fostered a competitive environment for employment within INGOs. Remaining within the sector while securing higher wages denominated in dollars or euros is predominantly achievable through this competitive dynamic.

The imbalance here stems from this: while one side can receive their salary in dollars, you receive Turkish Lira, and the gap between these two currencies deepens. Moreover, the cost of living in the country is rising. The cost of survival is increasing. Then that imbalance really stirs things up. (Interviewee 7)

I mean, they get paid two times more. We do the same job because they get paid in dollars and we get paid in TL. There are those who earn even more and those who earn less too. In some places, for example, salaries are half of what we get. (Interviewee 26)

Emerging challenges associated with insecurity and wages are addressed through these intra-sector mechanisms. Additionally, we identified another aspect of the sector that functions as a comparable mechanism concerning gender-related issues. While women employed in the humanitarian aid sector perceive certain advantages within the civil society framework, their working conditions can be significantly challenging. This is particularly true for female employees operating in the field. Women stationed in regions characterized by strong religious conservatism are susceptible to various forms of gender-based discrimination, both

during their fieldwork and in their interactions with official authorities necessary for facilitating field studies.

I mean, there is tremendous hatred towards women. Even when they see you in traffic, they look with hatred. You enter a shop and say “have a good day,” or enter an apartment building, encounter someone and say hello, etc. I mean, those bowed heads... I had learned not to shake hands in the public sector anyway. Unless the other side extends their hand, my hand is almost behind my back. I mean, I was relatively more comfortable during working hours because I was with people like us. But especially outside of working hours and during my meetings with the public officials, I saw myself very much as an object of hate on the social side. (Interviewee 33)

The life of a friend working in Urfa, Harran became a dungeon for a year. Because even wearing jeans was forbidden. And this is a feminist woman. So saying okay to a clothing ban feels very heavy. And it's jeans, after all, what a woman wears. Makeup was banned, etc. Even just the gaze of the people you deal with there can be tremendous harassment. (Interviewee 7)

Discrimination that manifests in the public sphere, outside the workplace, can significantly impede female employees' advancement to senior management positions within NGOs. There exists a preference for male employees in executive roles that necessitate engagement with bureaucratic offices, where a male-dominated mentality often prevails.

These challenges may compel female employees to engage in role-playing in the public sphere to perform their jobs. Interviewee 8 articulates this phenomenon by stating, “I go to neighborhoods as a fool,” which exemplifies the societal expectation of naivety imposed upon women. This expectation serves as a protective mechanism for female NGO employees, facilitating the exchange of information with male counterparts.

The challenges faced by women outside the workplace are, to some extent, mitigated by the environment within the workplace. Employment in the NGOs, not exclusively in the humanitarian aid sector, offers certain advantages for women. When we posed questions to interviewees regarding the status of women in this sector, we predominantly received affirmative responses. Although some participants noted a higher concentration of male employees in international INGOs with elevated wage levels (Interviewee 14), as well as a greater prevalence of men in executive positions (Interviewee 22), and highlighted that women's responsibilities for domestic care adversely impact the conditions of female

employees in this sector (Interviewees 20, 28, 29), the majority expressed the view that women experience relatively fewer disadvantages in the civil society sector. While a significant number of interviewees asserted that they did not encounter discrimination in their institutions due to their gender, there were also respondents who emphasized that the civil society sector is positively differentiated from other sectors in this regard.

In the private sector, the law of the jungle prevails. Even though we experience some negative things in civil society, one way or another, everyone has heard of gender equality. There are some standards that must be complied with. Let me call them behavioral standards. Therefore, I differentiate it from the private sector in that regard. (Interviewee 47)

Because in civil society gender equality is much more important. In our institution, there are many supportive mechanisms based on women's rights, including menstrual leave. That's why I have always felt safer. (Interviewee 14)

The humanitarian aid sector is characterized by rigorous fieldwork and frequent interactions with official authorities, which may render female employees in these roles susceptible to heightened discrimination. Conversely, as Interviewee 33 articulated in her earlier statement regarding the discrimination she encountered, the presence of civil society as a domain where "people like us" work can foster a more inclusive and supportive working environment for women, particularly regarding interpersonal relationships within the workplace. This dynamic enables female employees to ascribe a distinct value to the civil society sector, thereby differentiating it from both the private and public sectors. While NGOs normative commitments to gender equality may facilitate relatively egalitarian environments, thereby providing women with enhanced career opportunities compared to other sectors, the shared organizational values within these entities may temporarily mitigate the influence of prevailing societal gender norms.

The adaptation and coping mechanisms outlined above illuminate the pragmatic strategies employed by NGO employees. Their tendency to normalize challenges arising within work processes, coupled with their reliance on intra-sector mechanisms to address these issues rather than collective mechanisms such as legal recourse or unions, exemplifies a continuation of the professional middle-class occupational mindset. The normalization of the precarity associated with project-based work, along with their willingness to exert considerable effort in these projects without expecting anything in return, as discussed below, underscores their professional adaptation to the conditions inherent in NGO

work. When expressing grievances regarding inadequate wages, their framing of these concerns within a specific middle-class consumption context, along with the emphasis that female employees place on “the gender culture within the NGO,” highlights a cultural capital framework that aids in understanding NGO labor in conjunction with this professional work ethic. The forthcoming section will examine the limitations of this context in light of the physical and mental strain resulting from increasingly challenging working conditions.

Between Burnout and Emotional Reward

The work process within the humanitarian aid sector is characterized by significant intensity. The flexibility of working hours serves as a prominent manifestation of this intensity. Particularly within NGOs operating in the humanitarian aid domain, the practice of working beyond standard hours is a commonly accepted and internalized phenomenon. Many employees perceive the extension of working hours as “part of the job.” This arises both from the unique characteristics inherent to the humanitarian aid sector and from the demands associated with specific periods, such as project preparation and the submission of project reports. Employees engaged in fieldwork or related activities often find themselves compelled to extend their working hours in response to the “timelessness of demands emanating from the field.”

Moments of crisis never end. Your phone can ring like this at any moment, any minute, because a problem might have occurred somewhere. There is no one who doesn’t work on Sunday. I mean, it never happens like, “I work nine to six.” (Interviewee 14)

Last-minute jobs are very common in the sector because a very last-minute job can emerge either from the funding organization or regarding something you need to do at that moment. I mean, a document you checked forty times and sent; maybe you sent it a week ago to be checked. A week later is the deadline. They can check it that day, find something, and get back to you. (Interviewee 22)

The Urfa team calls and tells me, “I have such an event two days later; I need this.” What am I going to tell them? The event will inevitably be held two days later. I can’t say, “There is too much work; I can’t do it,” because I have to do it. Then, if necessary, I will need to work overtime and handle that job. (Interviewee 7)

In addition to normalization mechanisms concerning excessive and intense work such as “this is the nature of the job,” an emotional aspect often associated

with employment in civil society can be significantly effective in this context. We define “intrinsically rewarding work” as an additional dimension of the material labor process that is both meaningful and emotionally fulfilling. This motivation underlies the extra efforts made to maximize the distribution and benefits derived from donor funding, as well as the prioritization of demands from the field, irrespective of working hours. Similar to other types of employment, the routinization of tasks tends to gradually diminish the emotionally rewarding aspects of the work. Furthermore, a significant proportion of the interviewees indicated that they perceive the humanitarian aid sector as a conventional domain of employment for securing a livelihood, increasingly defined by bureaucratic processes that resemble those found in the private sector. However, despite the challenging realities associated with professionalization, it remains possible to discern a dimension of emotional satisfaction within the humanitarian aid sector that, although diminished, persists. Nearly all interviewees, with a few exceptions, conveyed that they assigned an additional meaning to their jobs that rendered the demanding and often exhausting nature of their responsibilities in humanitarian aid more tolerable for many of the participants.

If I saw it as just any job, I probably wouldn't do it. Because it is very tiring. And, frankly speaking, working in a job where there is no boss feels comfortable. I mean, not making money for a boss. What you produce is for a social benefit... Why are we working here? To carry the rural child's right to education to an equal place. (Interviewee 29)

Because the private sector is not for me. It is not a system I can work in, as I cannot work to make someone rich. I realized this. I find working for society more beneficial and right for myself instead of working for someone; working in this field satisfies me more for that reason. (Interviewee 14)

I was offered a position as a corporate communications specialist in digital communications. The lowest salary they offered was seven thousand five hundred liras. At that time, I started working in civil society for two thousand five hundred liras. However, I believed that I was serving a more meaningful purpose in the work I did, and I could live on two thousand five hundred liras. I said this is enough for me and preferred to stay in civil society. (Interviewee 7)

There were months when we didn't receive any salary at all—three or four months. People always ask, “Why did you stay?” Because the work you do is valuable. You work with the children of seasonal agricultural

workers. Those children need to exist somehow, and you provide that information to them and ensure the provision of the right to education in the simplest terms. Maybe this is exactly what we call pleasure. (Interviewee 28)

The intrinsically rewarding aspect of work within the humanitarian aid sector is particularly salient during periods of significant disasters. Several of our interviewees were actively engaged in the affected regions following the major earthquake that struck Türkiye's southern and eastern areas in February 2023. Interviewee 26, who had been working intensively for the past five to six months in the Adıyaman earthquake zone and resided in temporary container shelters during the interview, articulated their rationale for being present and their underlying motivation with the following statement:

I had to do this... You know, it's a professional responsibility. Someone had to go, and I had the means to go... I swear, I do everything I can to sustain it constantly. (Interviewee 2)

This interviewee also articulated that civil society has increasingly distanced itself from volunteerism, lacks the capacity to effectuate the changes it purports to champion, and has evolved into an ordinary business sector. The effort she invests in what she regards as an "ordinary job" reflects the dimension identified as intrinsic reward. Furthermore, the grievances expressed by the interviewee are corroborated by the consensus among nearly all respondents, indicating that the civil society sector has transformed into a conventional business domain, with institutionalization intensifying in accordance with the expectations of international donors. This observation is consistent with critical literature addressing the professionalization of non-governmental organizations (Joachim and Schneider, 2018). A significant concern arises from the increasing difficulty of sustaining "amateur" dedication within humanitarian aid NGOs that have adopted this business-like character. The inherent contradiction between the high levels of emotional investment and self-sacrifice associated with this type of work and the growing institutionalization and bureaucratization of the humanitarian aid sector prompts critical reflection.

We all gas each other up nicely. We work for hours, we wear out. We come to the breaking point. We get therapy support. Sometimes there is a great need for those corporate lines. How many hours will they work? What will be the job description? What will they get in return? We don't have that. (Interviewee 33)

This is a civil society organization, not a company. We came here because we don't want to work for a company. To work for an impact on society. It was something very sublime in the back of our minds, like, "Let it not fill someone's pocket." I worked with such motivation. Therefore, overtime work was like this for us. Now everything is very regulated; everything is very intense... But these overtime works are no longer what they used to be. They are no longer things you do from within, from your heart, saying, "Yes, I feel very peaceful." Why am I carrying water for this? I mean, really, why am I tormenting myself this much? (Interviewee 34)

In addition to the aforementioned concerns regarding the increasingly flexible working processes within a sector experiencing institutionalization, we also identified indications of psychological strain and, in certain instances, the limits of emotional reward. The majority of our interviewees were employees who were not trained professionals in social services and, consequently, lacked the expertise necessary to establish a psychological distance from the victims. Several interviewees, who were subjected to various forms of victimization over extended durations during their shifts, reported significant issues related to psychological strain.

I was in the disaster area for three months, and it was such day-and-night work. After a certain point, you feel like you're inside a balloon and think you have disconnected from real life. I have just returned from the disaster area to my own living space. I am experiencing adaptation problems. I find it strange when I go out on the street and when I sit in a café, because I haven't had personal space for three months. I have been in common living areas, common showers, and common bathrooms, in a living condition where there is no private space. Now that I am back here, I have trouble adjusting to life here, to urban life. (Interviewee 29)

I went out to the field in March. I worked very intensely in the field until August, especially with refugee women. This meant diving into their stories and going to those stories with them. I conducted in-depth interviews lasting for hours. Then I wrote about them, and my mood turned into something else. Small anger crises started, along with a constant sense of hopelessness. I mean, what are people living through? What kind of defective being is this thing called human? Is this world livable? There was a state of depression settling in these places. I received psychological support. (Interviewee 7)

This psychological wear may arise even among NGO employees possessing professional training, who might be expected to have the capacity to maintain a certain emotional distance from the victims. Interviewee 44, a psychologist, expressed that he did not consider continuing his employment with the NGO due to the secondary trauma he experienced as a result of his continuous exposure to the direct traumas of individuals in the field.

In addition to these factors, certain political dynamics can significantly influence the social experiences of humanitarian aid employees, potentially preventing them from receiving the emotional rewards associated with their intrinsically fulfilling work, or conversely, compelling them to conceal their professional activities in their daily lives. A considerable number of NGOs operating in the humanitarian aid sector in Türkiye have allocated funding in recent years to projects specifically aimed at assisting immigrants from Syria. The influx of immigrants into Türkiye following the onset of the Syrian conflict has been substantial, leading to a rise in anti-immigrant sentiment within the country. This sentiment has become a notable political phenomenon in Türkiye, a nation characterized by prolonged political polarization, where anti-immigrant attitudes may represent the only common ground among individuals with divergent political perspectives. Within this context, humanitarian aid employees engaged in labor-intensive projects related to immigrants may find it necessary to obscure their professional jobs in their social interactions outside of work. During the interviews we conducted, we documented only one instance of physical harassment related to this issue. Nonetheless, almost all interviewees involved in projects within this domain reported experiencing psychological pressure concerning their work.

Very, very much. It's not just a little. We were subjected to it while working in the field too. When people saw, they all had this impression like, "You are always helping refugees." I have had tensions with every one of my close friends, including my own father from time to time. Physical incidents occurred as well; there were those who marched on our friends in the field... Our own friends were attacked here. We also have Turkish citizen employees of Syrian origin, and one of them was stabbed. (Interviewee 11)

I was having difficulty explaining the work I did to my mom and dad, or that refugees were not being fed by the state, that there were actually separate funds. For example, while talking with my friends on vacation, you notice that thing. The first question they ask is when they will leave. I try not to get into professional content too much, frankly; I don't have to convince them. (Interviewee 33)

Instead of saying “humanitarian aid association” or “I work with immigrants,” saying “I work as a psychologist in a social assistance association” often involves beating around the bush without giving too much detail or getting into the specifics of the job. (Interviewee 44)

Because I am a civil society employee, specifically a humanitarian aid employee, I encounter serious bullying in my social life. For example, I see that a person I thought would not be anti-refugee under normal conditions has started to become more opposed lately and has begun to reflect that discourse toward me. Comments like, “They came too; we can’t get on the bus. We can’t return home at night. This happens, that happens... and you are helping them,” have been directed at me. They have started to express anger toward me. Additionally, I sometimes have difficulty explaining the work I do to people I have just met. (Interviewee 4)

Many NGO employees have a strong sense of social responsibility and derive considerable satisfaction and intrinsic reward from their work. As discussed above, however, this intrinsic motivation is continually tested, on the one hand by the managerial transformation of NGOs and, on the other, by work intensity, psychological strain, and rising anti-migrant sentiment. This section draws attention to this tension. Yet it would be difficult to argue that these adverse factors lead to substantial employee turnover towards other sectors: only a small number of interviewees expressed an intention to leave the sector for these reasons.

Conclusion

In this study, we argue that NGO employees, who are aware of their declining class and status position and develop coping strategies along two distinct dimensions. Drawing upon the conceptual framework suggested by Evetts (2013: 787), we have identified two types of professionalism that frequently stand in contradiction to one another among NGO employees: Organizational professionalism, which involves “rational-legal forms of authority and hierarchical structures of responsibility and decision-making” based on reorganizing work processes in a managerial way; and occupational professionalism, which is based on “autonomy and discretionary judgement and assessment by practitioners... occupational identities and work cultures” and is essentially constructed by groups working in professional occupations. The initial tendency emerges within the context of a specific managerial discourse, whereas the latter originates from the apprehensions of professionals striving to safeguard the autonomy of their respective fields against top-down and external influences akin to managerialism.

We observed that employees within NGOs exhibit a contradictory manifestation of both tendencies amid the precarious processes they encounter.

With regard to organizational professionalism, many of the NGO employees we interviewed, even those who express concerns regarding this process, perceive the reorganization of this field in managerial terms as an inevitable progression. The conditions associated with project-based employment have become largely normalized among sector employees. Consequently, flexible, intensive, prolonged, and insecure work arrangements are regarded as the standard or natural state of the sector. In response to such work practices, the rates of union organization and recourse to labor law are notably low, with the prevailing tendency being to adapt to these “normal conditions” through individual strategies. Mechanisms functioning at the individual level such as ensuring employment continuity within the sector —albeit not necessarily within a single NGO— and targeting employment opportunities in INGOs to mitigate wage pressures enhance the capacity of NGO employees to persist within the sector. Consequently, as long as international funding remains available, there is a prevailing tendency to regard the conditions of the sector as normative, thereby demonstrating professional adaptation.

On the other hand, from the perspective of occupational professionalism, while many of the employees interviewed perceive the NGO sector as a viable career path, they also articulated a connection to the sector through political and ethical values, such as social responsibility, volunteerism, and deliberate distancing from for-profit institutions. This value-driven relationship serves as a coping mechanism, compensating for the prolonged and demanding work processes endemic to the sector, a phenomenon we have termed “emotional reward.” Motivated by a sense of political or ethical social responsibility, numerous employees endure challenging conditions, including physical and psychological burnout, as well as aggressive and negative political reactions. In some cases, they actively strive to achieve supplementary outcomes for beneficiaries, even if this requires assuming additional work and responsibilities.

This devotion is not without conditions or limitations. Situations may arise in which the coexistence of these two forms of professionalism becomes strained. As the management style in NGOs increasingly resembles that of corporate entities, feelings of alienation may become more pronounced, as articulated by one interviewee who remarked, “Why should I keep carrying water to this mill?” Yet, although this sense of alienation leads NGO employees to question their employment more critically, these tensions do not lead to withdrawal from the sector, as long as mechanisms ensuring continuity of employment remain in place.

Akyüz (2010: 134–35), whose work proved highly inspiring to us at the outset of our study, draws attention to the possibility that the sense of internal satisfaction and self-expression derived from work in profit-oriented organizations may, paradoxically, constitute a form of alienation from the self, insofar as workers come to identify with work that remains external to them in the Marxist sense. From this perspective, the subjective experience of fulfillment may not necessarily indicate an overcoming of alienation but may instead reflect its internalization or concealment. Whether this argument can be extended to the experience of NGO professionals, however, remains an open question.

This question emerged as a central theme in the findings of our research as well. Our observations revealed that both tendencies, as articulated through Evetts's conceptualization of organizational and occupational professionalism, have been internalized by many of our interviewees. Specifically, workers who have normalized the institutional transformations contributing to the precarization of NGO work, while simultaneously developing individual coping and adaptation strategies within this new normal, emphasize the emotional rewards derived from their work despite the challenges posed by the same process, including loss of autonomy and physical and psychological burnout. This raises the question: can we, as Akyüz suggested without providing a definitive answer, assert that the intrinsic satisfaction and emotional rewards associated with work serve to obscure or compensate for the elements of alienation experienced within the same labor process?

A more precise formulation may suggest that workers experiencing a process of class decline have engaged in a form of individual accounting. The individualistic and sometimes opportunistic strategies adopted for normalized working conditions, alongside the emotional rewards invoked to compensate for those aspects of work that remain outside what is considered normal and contribute to physical and psychological distress, may appear to constitute a contradictory relationship. However, these can be reconciled within the framework that Bourdieu (1986) conceptualizes as the “economy of practices.” From a Bourdieusian perspective, the fact that NGO professionals derive a sense of meaning, moral satisfaction, or self-realization from their work does not necessarily contradict the material disadvantages associated with employment in the sector. Bourdieu's conception of the economy of practices allows us to move beyond a narrow economic understanding of what constitutes a return on one's investment in work. Practices are sustained not only by material benefits but also by forms of recognition, symbolic value, and other rewards that are meaningful within a particular field. From this perspective, the intrinsic and emotional rewards associated with NGO work can be understood as non-material returns that help

sustain workers' investment in their occupations despite low pay, employment insecurity, and demanding working conditions. From this perspective, not only the NGO workers analyzed in this study, but also all professional middle-class occupational groups undergoing precarization, are striving—through various strategies—to preserve or reconfigure their overall volume of capital. In the context of social transformation, where economic, cultural, social, and symbolic capital experience shifts in relative weight and volume, non-economic interests such as occupational professionalism, autonomy, meaningful work, and emotional reward can be situated within the broader economy of practices and understood through a coherent logic of accounting.

This field research was undertaken during a time when international humanitarian aid resources were substantially allocated to Türkiye in response to a devastating earthquake in the southern region of the country, resulting in an abundance of intra-sector employment opportunities. However, following the reduction of funding from the United States Agency for International Development (USAID)—which constitutes a significant portion of global humanitarian aid—implemented by the Trump administration that assumed office in early 2025, the NGO sector began to experience a pronounced contraction, not only in Türkiye but globally. In the current context, it is plausible to anticipate further stages of precarity, including prolonged unemployment for NGO employees, reliance on short-term and temporary positions from external organizations, and increased workloads for those who remain in the sector. Additionally, there may be a noticeable rise in individuals transitioning to different sectors. Therefore, in this new era characterized by enduring effects on the NGO landscape, research concerning NGO employees is of heightened importance for analyzing the dynamics of precariousness within professional middle-class occupations.

Türkçe Geniş Özet

Bu çalışma profesyonel orta sınıf mesleklerin maruz kaldıkları prekarizasyon süreçlerini, sivil toplum alanında faaliyet gösteren insani yardım kuruluşlarında çalışanlar üzerinden ele almaktadır. Çalışma bu alanda faaliyet gösteren farklı STK'larda çalışan 48 kişi ile yapılan derinlemesine görüşmelere dayanmaktadır.

Çalışma temel olarak insani yardım çalışanlarının kendi sınıfsal pozisyonlarını, profesyonel meslek sahibi orta sınıflar olarak maruz kaldıkları prekarizasyon süreçlerini nasıl algıladıkları ve bununla ilgili baş etme stratejilerini ele almaktadır. Bu öznel boyut dolayısıyla, metin yazımında görüşmecilerin bireysel deneyimlerini daha iyi yansıtmak amacıyla görüşmelerden bol alıntı yapılmıştır.

Sivil toplum 1990'lardan başlayarak "gönüllülük, yerel katılım, taban demokrasisi" gibi kavramlarla beraber anılmıştır. 2000'lerden başlayarak ise giderek

profesyonelleşen bir meslek alanına dönüşmüştür. “Üçüncü sektör” olarak da isimlendirilen sivil toplum alanı, özellikle uluslararası fon sağlayan donörlerin talepleri çerçevesinde ciddi dönüşümler geçirmiş ve özel sektör benzeri bir yapıya kavuşmuştur. Gönüllülük esaslı kurumların uluslararası donörlerin beklenti ve talepleri doğrultusunda profesyonel iş bölümünün ve uzmanlıkların hâkim olduğu işletme türü yapılara dönüşmeleri, STK alanında çalışmanın profesyonel niteliğini artırmıştır.

Öte yandan hem bu çalışma hem de bu alanda yapılan az sayıdaki bazı başka çalışmalar göstermektedir ki STK alanında çalışmak “adanmışlık”, “sosyal sorumluluk” gibi nosyonları hala içerisinde barındırmaktadır. Bu alanda çalışanlar kendilerini ne kadar profesyonel olarak tanımlasalar da, ortaya koydukları emeğin farklı şekillerde ifade edilen duygusal boyutu oldukça yüksektir.

Profesyonellik ve sosyal sorumluluk arasındaki bu denge STK emeğinin maruz kaldığı prekarizasyon süreçleri tarafından bozulmaktadır. Bu alanda yaşanan prekarizasyonun en önemli alt başlıkları iş güvencesinin ortadan kalkması, ücretlerin erimesi, yoğun ve düzensiz çalışma düzeni olarak özetlenebilir. Bu genel başlıkların yanı sıra, kadın çalışanların özellikle saha çalışmalarında karşılaştıkları fazladan güçlükler, toplumda yükselen göçmen karşıtlığının bu alandaki insani yardım çalışanlarına olumsuz şekilde yansması gibi daha özgün boyutlar da bulunmaktadır.

Uluslararası fonlara bağlı olarak ortaya çıkan STK istihdamı bu fonların akışına göre işlemektedir. İstihdam proje bazlıdır ve proje bittiğinde, eğer başka bir fon ve proje bulunamıyorsa, istihdam da bitmektedir. STK dünyasında sektörün bu özelliği bir tür varsayımsal önşart olarak kabul görmüştür. Fakat bu durum, bu sektörde çalışanlar açısından oldukça kaygan bir zemin yaratmaktadır. Çalışanlar bir yandan “yapacak bir şey olmadığını, bunun sektörün doğası olduğunu” düşünmektedirler, öte yandan sektör içi devir daim mekanizmalarına bağlı olarak iş güvencelerini eğreti bir şekilde sağlamaya çalışmaktadırlar.

Ücretler Türkiye özelinde kötü olmasa da, özellikle son dönemde yaşanan yüksek enflasyon birçok STK çalışanı açısından ücretlerinin ciddi anlamda erimesi anlamına gelmiştir. Bu konuda STK çalışanları döviz bazında ücret ödeyen uluslararası STK’larda istihdam olanaklarını zorlayarak bu erimeyi gidermeye çalışmaktadırlar. Fakat bu herkes için mümkün olmamaktadır.

Bu hususlarla ilgili olarak STK çalışanları, örneğin örgütlenmek gibi, kolektif mekanizmalara yoğun olarak başvurmamakta, sektör içi dengeleme mekanizmaları içerisinde bireysel yollar aramaktadırlar.

Sektörün genel kabul görmüş başka bir özelliği de düzenli çalışma saatlerinin olmaması ve yoğun çalışmadır. Bu boyut birçok STK çalışanı açısından en yıpratıcı özelliklerden bir olarak öne çıkmaktadır. STK emeğinin içerdiği duygusal boyut bu

noktada öne çıkmaktadır. Birçok çalışan yoğun ve düzensiz çalışmayı sosyal sorumluluk, adanmışlık gibi duygusal ödüllerle dengelemeye çalışmaktadır.

Kadın çalışanların saha çalışmalarında karşılaştıkları cinsiyetçi davranışlar; son dönemde ülkemizde yaşanan depremler sonrasında bu alana yönelen insani yardım faaliyetlerinde, çalışanların onları normal hayatlarından koparacak denli yoğun ve yıpratıcı çalışma koşulları içerisine girmeleri de çalışmada ön plana çıkmıştır. Tüm bunlar sosyal sorumluluk nosyonu çerçevesinde dengelenmeye çalışılmaktadır. Fakat yine ülkemizde göçmen sayısının artmasına bağlı olarak buraya yönelen fonlara bağlı olarak bu alanda çoğalan projelerde göre alan STK çalışanları toplumdan, hatta yakın aile ve arkadaş çevrelerinden dahi olumsuz tepkiler almaktadırlar. Toplumda yükselen göçmen karşıtı duygular bu alanda faaliyet gösteren insani yardım çalışanlarına da yansımaktadır. Bu durumda yoğun ve düzensiz çalışma karşısında beklenen duygusal ödül de ortadan kalkmaktadır.

Sonuç olarak, sektörde işbölümü ve profesyonelleşmenin getirdiği yabancılaşmanın yanı sıra, yukarıda bahsedilen hususlara bağlı olarak duygusal kopma ve yabancılaşma da deneyimlenmektedir. Her ne kadar STK'ların profesyonel işletme türü yerlere dönüşmesini belirli mekanizmalarla ve duygusal tatmin ile dengeleyebilseler de, profesyonelliğin bir diğer boyutu olan, kendi emek alanlarında söz sahibi olmak ve takdir görmek gibi özellikler giderek ortadan kaybolmaktadır. Bu anlamda STK emeği, prekarizasyon süreçlerinin dönüştürdüğü özgün bir istihdam sosyolojisini ortaya koymaktadır. Özellikle ABD'deki yeni yönetimin, küresel fonların büyük bir bölümünü sağlayan United States Agency for International Development (USAID) neredeyse ortadan kaldırmasıyla birlikte büyük bir sıkıntıya giren sektördeki istihdamın ne yönde dönüşeceği farklı araştırmaların konusu olmaya adaydır.

Contributions

Author Contributions

Study design: AB, AU, GGÖ; data collection: AB, AU, GGÖ; data analysis: AB, AU, GGÖ; manuscript writing: AB, AU; manuscript revision: GGÖ.

Conflict of interest

There is no conflict of interest with any institution, organization, or individual. There is no conflict of interest among the authors.

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