

## The Effects of the Covid-19 Pandemic on Social Inequalities: The Case of Eskişehir<sup>1</sup>

### *Covid-19 Pandemisinin Toplumsal Eşitsizliklere Etkileri: Eskişehir Örneği*

*Araştırma Makalesi – Research Article*

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#### **Abstract**

This study aims to relate how the Covid-19 pandemic affects social life, what kind of inequalities it creates, and how it affects existing social inequalities with the social class structure. In this context, the differentiation of the results of the pandemic according to class position has been problematized in the study, based on the daily life practices of individuals. In the literature review, it is seen that the social dimension of the Covid-19 pandemic is generally neglected. From this point of view, in this article, the social dimension of the pandemic has been discussed within the scope of class perspective. In this study, a total of 30 participants from different socioeconomic classes were interviewed using the semi-structured in-depth interview technique. In the interviews, it is understood that the main reason for the different experiences of individuals during the Covid-19 epidemic process is class differentiation. In the interviews conducted for this study, it was observed that individuals in the lower socioeconomic class experienced more income and job losses than other individuals, and therefore they faced more social risks. Considering the participants' experience of alternative working forms which was implemented in this period, it is one of the important findings that the participants in the lower socioeconomic class are the class with the least experience of alternative working styles, and accordingly, these individuals feel more insecure during the pandemic period. In the study, it is evaluated that the Covid-19 pandemic has increased the social inequalities that already exist in the society.

**Keywords:** Covid-19 pandemic, social inequality, stratification, socioeconomic class, Eskişehir

#### **Öz**

Bu çalışma, Covid-19 pandemisinin toplumsal yaşamı nasıl etkilediğini, ne gibi eşitsizlikler yarattığını, var olan toplumsal eşitsizliklere ne şekilde etki ettiğini toplumsal sınıf yapısıyla ilişkilendirmeyi hedeflemektedir. Bu bağlamda, çalışmada bireylerin gündelik yaşam pratiklerinden yola çıkılarak pandeminin meydana getirdiği sonuçların sınıf konumuna göre farklılaşması sorunsallaştırılmıştır. Yapılan literatür taramasında Covid-19 pandemisinin genellikle sosyal boyutunun ihmal edildiği görülmektedir. Buradan hareketle bu makalede pandeminin sosyal boyutu sınıf perspektifi kapsamında ele alınmıştır. Araştırma kapsamında yarı-yapılandırılmış derinlemesine mülakat tekniği kullanılarak farklı sosyoekonomik sınıflarda yer alan toplam 30 katılımcı ile görüşme gerçekleştirilmiştir. Yapılan görüşmelerde bireylerin Covid-19 salgını sürecindeki deneyimlerinin birbirinden farklı olmasının temel sebebinin sınıfsal farklılaşma olduğu anlaşılmaktadır. Araştırma kapsamında gerçekleştirilen görüşmelerde alt sosyoekonomik sınıfta yer alan bireylerin diğer kişilere göre daha çok gelir ve iş kaybı yaşadığı buna bağlı olarak sosyal risklerle daha fazla karşı karşıya kaldıkları görülmüştür. Katılımcıların bu dönemde hayata geçirilen alternatif çalışma biçimlerini deneyimleme durumuna bakıldığında ise alt sosyoekonomik sınıfta yer alan katılımcıların alternatif çalışma biçimlerini en az deneyimleyen sınıf olduğu ve buna bağlı olarak bu bireylerin pandemi döneminde kendilerini daha güvensiz hissettikleri elde edilen önemli

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bulgularındır. Çalışmada Covid-19 pandemisinin toplumda hali hazırda var olan toplumsal eşitsizlikleri daha da arttığı değerlendirilmektedir

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Covid-19 pandemisi, toplumsal eşitsizlik, tabakalaşma, sosyoekonomik sınıf, Eskişehir

### Introduction

The new type of coronavirus, which first broke out in Wuhan, China on the last day of 2019, spread all over the world rapidly and affected millions of people in only a short time, and this virus named Covid-19 was declared a pandemic by the World Health Organization on 11 March, 2020. The Covid-19 pandemic, which has become the number one agenda item in the world since the first days of 2020, has led to the emergence of numerous problems in the economic, health and social fields and created a global crisis environment. While countries took similar measures such as quarantine practices and curfews in the emerging crisis environment, quarantine practices involving billions of people were carried out for the first time in the world's history in the spring of 2020.<sup>2</sup>

While this virus, which first appeared in China, became a global pandemic in only a short time, it had effects in various economic, political, psychological and sociological fields, mainly in the field of human and public health. In discussions at the very beginning of the pandemic, it was assumed that the new corona virus would affect everyone equally; However, it soon became clear that both the way the pandemic was experienced and the ability of various groups, such as race, class and gender, to adapt to the measures implemented in this process were shaped according to the social inequalities before the pandemic.<sup>3</sup> Even though it is assumed that every person living in society is directly or indirectly affected by the Covid-19 pandemic, it is understood in this study that not everyone is affected by this pandemic in the same way, and the way individuals are affected by the pandemic differs according to their social class.

Whereas various restrictions were imposed worldwide in the spring of 2020, when the pandemic was most intense and a treatment had not yet been developed, it was observed that the way these restrictions were implemented appeared differently among the social strata. At that time, it was seen that not everyone in society could comply with the calls made to stay at home within the scope of quarantine practices, and this situation was very different in practice. In particular, the fact that individuals from the lower socioeconomic class could not stay at home and had to go to work revealed that the pandemic was not at an equal distance from everyone and that there was class differentiation. However, it was observed that individuals from the middle or upper socioeconomic class, who might be in a better socioeconomic situation than others during the pandemic period, could better protect themselves against the coronavirus by going to work less or by working from home. This shows that existing social inequalities have increased with the pandemic. Within the scope of the study, it is aimed to discover the differences and similarities in the experiences of the individuals during the pandemic depending on their socioeconomic class position by way of the interviews made with participants from different socioeconomic classes.

### Literature Review

#### Stratification and class structure

Stratification is a sociological phenomenon that exists within the social structure. Although its emergence and application differs, a stratification system is seen in almost every society. The fact that there are socioeconomically different groups in the social structure and an unequal division of power and wealth through these groups leads to the emergence of stratification within society. We can see that individuals have different and unequal positions in society. While these differences are defined as social stratification, groups consisting of individuals sharing the same advantages and disadvantages are defined as social stratification.<sup>4</sup> According to Parsons, social stratification is the differential ranking of individuals that make up a particular social system and the treatment of them as superior and inferior to

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<sup>2</sup> Gökalp Yılmaz, 2021, 62.

<sup>3</sup> Estrala, Soares, Cruz et al., 2020, .3432.

<sup>4</sup> Sunar, 2018, 9.

each other in some socially important aspects.<sup>5</sup> In short, social stratification can be defined as the production process of structural inequalities that arise between social groups. Class, on the other hand, is actually a different type of stratification. The shaping of strata in the modern capitalist society that we live in is mostly based on socioeconomic differences.

Accordingly, hierarchical stratifications among groups that arise from differences as a result of social, economic and cultural inequalities are all indeed a class.<sup>6</sup> When it comes to the issue of inequality, it is known that this issue is as old as human history and is a social phenomenon that occurs in every society and period. While various disciplines deal with inequality, its causes and consequences in different perspectives, sociology is concerned with explaining the social consequences of inequalities. According to Turner, inequality is a set of relations that characterize groups, strata and classes in society. According to him, the inequality amongst individuals is a result of their position in the social structure.<sup>7</sup> As can be understood from here, when viewed from a sociological point of view, inequality is actually an outcome that does not naturally exist, but rather an outcome of social structures, institutions and policies. Social inequality, on the other hand, is sociologically defined and differentiated mostly according to power, status and class.

Although social stratification generally occurs due to economic and social differences, economic differences make up an important dimension of stratification in the modern capitalist society that we live in. Although the ownership of the means of production and the amount of salary which salaried employees get directly affect the economic dimension of stratification, the social dimension of stratification is affected by differences in position, status and fame. Although social stratifications usually occur from economic or social differentiation, groups that gain privileges on the basis of knowledge which does not present concrete evidence such as religious knowledge, fortune-telling, magic and so on, also constitute another type of differentiation. Even though there are many different types of stratifications, there are certain common basic features to all of these stratifications. These are that stratification originates from the individual as well as from society, is transmitted from generation to generation, and is universal. Although there are various types of stratification and strata that have these basic common features, this study focuses on class type stratification. Class-type stratification emerged as a result of the fact that the industrialization that took place in the eighteenth century spread rapidly on a global scale, and that capitalism became the basic economic system. This type of stratification is the most common form of stratification faced in today's modern capitalist society. Social class is generally defined by sociologists as groups that share the same power, status and socioeconomic level in a society. According to Weber, to be able to talk about a class, it is necessary that the life opportunities of the people in a group should be causally in common, this common causal factor should represent economic interests such as making a profit, and this factor should be represented in labor conditions.<sup>8</sup> The social class system differs from other types of stratification because the classes in this system are not separated from each other with definite lines, have movable borders, classes are generally economically based, and social interaction and transitions between strata are possible.<sup>9</sup>

As a consequence of the formation of modern industrial society, class type stratification has formed, and this stratification has existed for centuries being regarded as the most common form of stratification. In the class type stratification, which at first proceeded on two basic classes which were comprised of property owners and workers, the middle class which is a third class has become more important with the period also called the information period as a result of technological advancements experienced over the last fifty years. With the change in the type of society, the social structure in which the classical worker and bourgeoisie distinction was found began to break down from different perspectives. With this change, a number of sociologists have expressed social stratification in three, five or more different ways.<sup>10</sup> In the triple division of stratification, large property owners make up the

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<sup>5</sup> Parsons, 1940, 841.

<sup>6</sup> Sunar, 2018, 17.

<sup>7</sup> Turner, 1997, 58.

<sup>8</sup> Gerth and Mills, 1996, 269.

<sup>9</sup> Sunar, 2018, 17

<sup>10</sup> Sunar, 2018, 18-19.

upper class, salaried managers, professionals, and white-collar workers make up the middle class, whereas workers who sell their manual labor for low wages make up the lower class.

### Stratification and Inequality in Health

In this study, it is necessary to mention the concept of health and the unequal conditions relating to health while the social reflections of the Covid-19 pandemic, which is actually a health problem, are discussed. According to the World Health Organization, health is defined as individuals being in a state of complete physical, psychological and social well-being. As can be understood from this definition, it can be seen that health has a social aspect. In addition, even though health is a sociological concept, it is also affected by the social status of individuals. Health, which is one of the basic institutions of society, and disease are not only a problem for individuals anymore, but also have come under the control of the state. However, since social institutions affect each other, health is also affected by the socio-cultural structure of society.<sup>11</sup> Illness and health; the roots of both lie in the depths of living and working conditions, social relations. Health and disease are products of both social factors and health services. Health services are determined within the framework of the social and political structure and cannot be considered separately from the social structure.<sup>12</sup>

In fact, on the basis of health and illness, social relations, working and living conditions play a role. When viewed from a different perspective, it can be seen that the population structure of a society, culture, family, economy and social class are among the factors that affect health the most. The point to be emphasized here is that the socioeconomic status of individuals directly affects their health levels. In particular, factors such as malnutrition caused by economic deprivation, living under unfavorable housing conditions, and not being able to access health services adequately directly affect human health in a negative way. Studies have shown that negativities resulting from various social factors lie on the basis of many diseases. Therefore, the distribution of disease and health in society differs according to different social classes. The social classes to which individuals belong affect their state of health. There is an indirect interaction between the social class of individuals and the diseases they have had. The holistic improvements that have taken place in the field of public health in the past century have not been able to hide the fact that health and disease do not spread equally among the general population. Studies have shown that some groups are healthier than others. This situation is related to the socio-economic structures of societies.<sup>13</sup> For example, the wealthy and individuals from the upper socioeconomic class in society become ill less often than those in the lower socioeconomic class, and the period of recovery from disease is shorter compared to them. However, the average life expectancy of the poor in society is significantly lower than that of the rich. In the study entitled *Fair Society and Healthy Lives* published in Britain, it is stated that the poorest 5% of society live seventeen years less than the richest 5% of society.<sup>14</sup>

The concept of 'public health' emerged as health ceased to be an individual situation and came under state control. According to the concept of public health, disease is not only an individual problem, but also a social problem. With the Covid-19 pandemic, which has become a global pandemic, the concept of public health has come to the fore again and the coronavirus disease is a public health problem that is an example of this concept. When the pandemic first appeared, statements and public advice were broadcast stating that this virus was at an equal distance to everyone, but over time it was seen that the coronavirus was not at an equal distance to everyone. We observed that people from the lower socioeconomic class could not comply with many of the measures taken, such as curfews, staying away from crowds, staying at home, and on the contrary, they had to use crowded public transport even during the heaviest period of the pandemic as well as having to go to work during curfews. However, it is clear that these people were more vulnerable to the coronavirus because they could not rest adequately, eat healthily or take time for themselves. In many studies, it has been observed that the groups most negatively affected by the pandemic are disadvantaged groups such as immigrants, the poor, the elderly and women. Based on all of this, it can be concluded that the pandemic is directly or indirectly related

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<sup>11</sup> Aytac and Kurttaş, 2015, 232-233.

<sup>12</sup> Deppe, 2011, 43.

<sup>13</sup> Giddens, 2005, 144.

<sup>14</sup> Strategic Review of Health Inequalities in England, 2010, 16.

to the class positions of individuals and the lower the socioeconomic status of the person is, the more adversely affected they are by the pandemic.

### **Covid-19 Pandemic**

On 31 December, 2019, cases of pneumonia of unknown cause were reported in the city of Wuhan, the capital of the Hubei province in China. On 7 January, 2020, it was understood that the cause of these cases was a new type of coronavirus (2019-nCoV) that had not been seen in humans before. This virus spread rapidly from person to person when the droplets left by sick people in their environment while speaking, coughing or sneezing clung to surfaces and reached the mouths, noses or eyes of people who touched that surface. The disease was not taken too seriously when it first appeared and was evaluated as a small-scale local disease. However, this virus spread to more than one hundred countries and became a global pandemic in only two or three months. In the period when this study was conducted, 766 million people were infected with the disease from the first day of the pandemic, while 6.9 million of these people died.<sup>15</sup> The global pandemic caused by this new type of coronavirus, which emerged in China, has had an impact on many economic, psychological and sociological aspects, mainly on human and public health.

The area that the Covid 19 pandemic affected social life the most after human health is the economy. Countries took various measures to prevent the spread of the pandemic. Among the measures taken in this regard, there were practices such as curfews, quarantine procedures, temporary closure of certain businesses, and restriction of entry and exit to countries. It is understood that all these measures taken against the spread of the pandemic have caused great damage to economies on both a local and a global scale. While the global economy was affected negatively during the pandemic period, according to the data announced by the IMF, real growth on a global scale was 3.5% in 2020.<sup>16</sup>

Within the scope of the restrictions applied during this period, many businesses temporarily or permanently stopped trading; therefore, there was an increase in layoffs, and this caused the people working in the service sector to be adversely affected. People whose workplaces were closed during the pandemic were either unemployed or had to live with an income much lower than their actual salary by receiving unemployment benefits. According to the World Labor Organization, approximately 225 million people lost their jobs globally in 2020 due to the epidemic.<sup>17</sup>

In addition to the health, economic and social effects of the Covid-19 pandemic, one of the most affected areas has been education. Within the scope of the measures taken to prevent the spread of the pandemic, face-to-face education was stopped at every level of education from kindergardens to higher education and distance education was started. In the observations made during the process, it was understood that neither educational institutions nor students or their families were ready for this radical change. Therefore, many problems and imbalances occurred in the field of education during this period, and millions of students on a global scale were negatively affected by this situation. While there have been serious debates about the fact that there is no equality of opportunity even in formal education, these equality of opportunity discussions have reached a different dimension with the distance education implemented during the Covid-19 pandemic period. In a study conducted by the United Nations Education Agency, it was stated that approximately 830 million students worldwide did not have a computer that they could use at home, and almost 40% of these students did not have an internet connection.<sup>18</sup> However, it is known that the children of families from the middle and upper classes in society could access distance education material such as computers and the internet much more easily. From this point of view, it was observed that individuals could not participate equally in the distance education implemented during the pandemic period. When distance education started, it was seen that distance education models had already been implemented in 186 countries around the world, while a number of countries adapted to distance education faster both in terms of equipment and resources. In

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<sup>15</sup> World Health Organization, 2023.

<sup>16</sup> International Monetary Fund, 2021.

<sup>17</sup> International Labour Organization, 2021.

<sup>18</sup> United Nations, 2020.

this process, it was determined that 463 million students could not participate in distance education on a global scale and that three quarters of these students lived in poor households or rural areas.<sup>19</sup>

According to the 'The State of the Global Education Crisis' report presented by the World Bank, while it is observed that the Covid-19 pandemic has negatively affected the education process on a global scale, the increase in learning poverty due to the pandemic may cause the next generation to be damaged in reaching their true potential. Students who had to drop out of school or stay away from education during this period are especially at risk of settling for lower productivity and earnings throughout their lives. Students from poor and marginalized families may be more affected by this negative picture in education, and inequalities may increase. Children who were already poor and needed more education to escape poverty could not reach the education they needed during the pandemic period due to their poor conditions and became victims in this situation.<sup>20</sup>

As can be seen, the Covid-19 pandemic, which has affected social life from different perspectives, should be considered to be a sociological phenomenon as well as being an ordinary epidemic. Because this pandemic has also affected social structures, institutions and policies besides human health, it has shaped the social structure. In this sense, it is important to assess the Covid-19 pandemic from a sociological point of view. It can be seen that the Covid-19 pandemic, which spread to one hundred and fourteen different countries in about seventy days from the moment it emerged, affected the social structure and the institutions of this structure from different perspectives. During this period, with the spread of working from home being an effect of the pandemic, the family institution and social life were also affected. Individuals who had not experienced working from home before faced various problems in separating private life and business life while trying to get used to this working method because of the pandemic. In this situation, known as the work-life conflict, the problem of blurring the line between private life and work life of the person working from home arises. However, in this study, it can be seen that domestic labor such as child care, following up children's homework, and doing housework are mostly performed by women, even in cases where parents who share the roles of mother and father are in the household at the same time, and proves that gender inequality deepened during the isolation process.

The family institution, which is accepted as the basic building block of society, has also been one of the institutions affected by the Covid-19 pandemic. Due to the quarantine practices implemented during this period, people started to spend time with each other at home more than ever before. With the increase in the time family members spend together at home, disagreements and conflicts have become inevitable. As a result, an increase in divorce rates has been observed in many countries in the world. Carly Kinch, an expert in the field of divorce and family law, stated in an interview with the BBC that they determined that there was a 122% increase in the number of divorce cases between June and October 2020. Looking at the data in the marriage and divorce statistics announced by the Turkish Statistical Institute (TUIK), the divorce rate, which was 1.64 per thousand in 2020, increased by 70% in 2021 and became 2.07 per thousand.<sup>21</sup> The effects of the Covid-19 pandemic on the family were not limited to the increase in divorce rates, but also had negative effects such as increased domestic violence. Practices such as quarantine and curfew applied during this period forced many women who were victims of violence and their abusers to spend more time in the same environment.<sup>22</sup> This process was tough for children, women, and the elderly, who had to spend time in the same environment with their abuser in a vulnerable way under the risk of violence. For these reasons, it is thought that the practices implemented in order to reduce the spread of the pandemic during this period have caused an increase in domestic violence by creating space for malicious people indirectly, if not intentionally.<sup>23</sup>

One of the most important effects of the Covid-19 pandemic on the social structure has been the change in social relations and the socialization process. Due to the restrictions applied in this period, people could not socialize as before, and they tried to meet their socialization needs mostly through

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<sup>19</sup> UNESCO, UNICEF and World Bank Report, 2021.

<sup>20</sup> World Bank Report, 2020, 6.

<sup>21</sup> Türkiye İstatistik Kurumu, 2022.

<sup>22</sup> Taub, 2020, 6.

<sup>23</sup> Karimivand, 2021, 51.

digital platforms. This has brought with it spending a long time in front of devices such as computers and phones inactively at home and, as a result, people have started to develop problems both physically, mentally and spiritually. While this situation caused an increase in technology addiction, it also paved the way for the deterioration of social relations with the occurrence of anxiety and stress disorders in humans.<sup>24</sup> It is expected that the deterioration in social relations between individuals will first negatively affect the family structure, and accordingly the family structure will begin to deteriorate, and then a change and transformation will occur in the social structure due to weakening social relations.

Another negative effect of the pandemic on the social structure is the increased incidence of social exclusion. The stigma associated with COVID-19 is based on three main factors. As this pandemic is a new disease and little is known about, societies often fear the unknown; and they tend to associate this fear with “others”.<sup>25</sup> While people are already subjected to social exclusion due to reasons such as their identities, religions, races and skin colours, the pandemic has added new ones to these. In this period, while it was observed that there was exclusionary behavior in social life against healthcare professionals, who were among the occupational groups directly fighting the disease, there was also an increase in xenophobia. Because of the news reports in the media claiming that the disease was first detected in China, and other variants were named after the region where they first appeared, many people were marginalized because of their physical appearance and, in this process, xenophobia (hostility towards foreigners) increased significantly; sometimes even violent reactions were committed against individuals. For example, on 17 March, 2021, an armed attack was carried out on a massage parlor belonging to people of Asian origin in the state of Georgia, USA, and eight people died as a result. Within the scope of the investigation made after the attack, it was stated that the attacker had racist thoughts towards Asians and that he organized the attack because of racism that increased during the pandemic period. In this context, when we look at the events taking place on a global scale, it can be seen that the Covid-19 pandemic has deepened the inequalities in the social structure in general and created new inequalities by increasing social exclusion and xenophobia.

### **Methodology**

In the previous sections of the study, the general effects of the Covid-19 pandemic were analyzed. In this section, the effects of the pandemic on the social structure will be discussed from a sociological perspective by analyzing the data obtained as a result of qualitative interviews. Being able to understand the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic on the social structure will help us to make sense of the developments in today's world, and it will also help humanity in the process of overcoming and making sense of possible pandemics that may occur from now on. This is one of the most important aims of the research. Because when the previous epidemics in the world are examined, it can be seen that these epidemics play important roles in social changes and transformations. Therefore, it can be deduced that pandemics are phenomena that affect social structures.

The qualitative research method was chosen in the research because the object of the research is to discover how the Covid-19 pandemic was experienced by individuals from different socioeconomic classes, and how it has affected social inequalities. In this regard, the interviews with the participants were made as semi-structured interviews. Throughout the interviews, open-ended questions were asked giving the participants the opportunity to make free associations, so that in-depth information on the subject could be obtained. Through the interviews, the aim was to reveal the level that different socioeconomic classes were affected by the pandemic and the effect of the pandemic on social inequalities based on their daily life experiences during the pandemic period.

The study group of the research consists of a total of thirty people, ten of whom are from three different socioeconomic classes, namely the lower, middle and upper socioeconomic classes, living in the city of Eskişehir. While making this categorization, the monthly household income of the people was taken as a basis, and the poverty line was made on the basis of official data for that period, such as the lowest civil servant salary. The snowball sampling technique was chosen for access to the participants. Since this research was conducted during a period when the Covid-19 pandemic was still affecting, some of the interviews could be conducted face to face. However, since some of the

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<sup>24</sup> Öztürk, 2021, p.202.

<sup>25</sup> UNİCEF, 2020.

participants did not want to meet face to face, for his reason an online interview was held with those participants via Zoom or WhatsApp. The interviews were audio-recorded for deciphering, with the consent of the participants. After the interviews were completed, the audio recordings were listened to by the researcher, deciphered and categorized. Microsoft Office programs were used in the process of deciphering and categorizing the data. In addition, content analysis method, a qualitative research method, was used to analyze the data. Content analysis method; It is a scientific method that enables the systematic and objective examination of written, verbal and various materials. In addition, the objective data analysis method of the grounded theory design was used during the analysis of the data. Based on this principle, it is aimed to see the relationships between the data in the literature and the data discovered by the researcher. Ethics Committee obligation has been introduced in every in-depth interview study since 2020. Since the in-depth interviews that form the basis of this study were conducted after 2020, ethics committee approval was required. The aforementioned permission was obtained from Anadolu University Social and Human Sciences Scientific Research and Publication Ethics Committee dated 25 March, 2022, and numbered 274113. This is accessible in the appendix of this article. In addition, an informed consent form was signed by the volunteer participants before interview.

### Research and Findings

Although the Covid-19 pandemic was initially seen as basically equally dangerous for everyone, it has shown that everything is actually class-based and even the ways people are affected by a global pandemic differ depending on the inequalities that exist in society. Many countries around the world during the intense periods of the pandemic; it chosen to take similar measures such as closing borders, reducing transportation activities, holidaying schools, closing workplaces that could accelerate the spread of the epidemic, and starting online working practices<sup>26</sup>. However, it has been observed that not all segments of society comply with these measures to the same extent. Business sectors at the top of the social stratification, with highly-skilled and highly-paid employees, are generally amenable to remote work. Therefore, during the pandemic, white-collar professionals working in these sectors were able to easily adapt themselves to working from home. Thus, they were able to continue doing their jobs by keeping themselves in safer environments within the scope of Covid-19 pandemic measures. However, this was not the case for lower socioeconomic classes. Workers working in sectors such as food, grocery, retail trade and manufacturing jobs do not have the opportunity to work remotely. That's why they had to go at work. At the same time, workers working in these sectors generally have no labor security, are low-skilled and work for low wages<sup>27</sup>. During the pandemic, workers in these sectors went to their workplaces because they had to make a living. They have not been able to experience alternative ways of working such as working from home, like individuals in other socioeconomic classes. As in every epidemic period, during this epidemic period, low-skilled and low-paid working individuals had to choose between continuing to work or being laid off<sup>28</sup>. In the interviews conducted within the scope of the research, it was learned that people from every socioeconomic class experienced worries about losing their jobs or income during this period, while the social support mechanisms of those in the upper socioeconomic class were more developed, and that the individuals in the lower socioeconomic class overcame this process more painfully. Indeed, a few participants in the lower socioeconomic class stated that they could not even meet their most basic needs such as shelter, heating and nutrition on their own, and that they were in need of assistance. While it was discovered that of the participants more than half of those who lost their incomes and jobs during the pandemic were individuals in the lower socioeconomic class, it can be said that people in this class are more open to social risks based on these answers. Again, a number of participants in the lower socioeconomic class, while talking about their experiences during the pandemic period, stated that they could not get their salaries from their bosses for months, and even if they did, they could only get around two-thirds of their salary, and that they had to go to work even on days when there was a curfew due to the arbitrary practices of the bosses.

The participants were asked questions regarding their working style and workload during the pandemic period. The participants who had the opportunity to work in education, informatics or the

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<sup>26</sup> Oran, 2020, p.563.

<sup>27</sup> Bozkurt and Sayın, 2020, p.207.

<sup>28</sup> Quinn and Kumar, 2014, p.266.

public sector stated that they had experienced alternative working styles such as flexible, rotating or remote working due to the nature of their jobs. More than half of the participants who were from the lower socioeconomic class and who worked in the production and service sectors stated that it was not possible to work flexibly or alternately during the pandemic period, and they had to continue their normal working pattern as if nothing had happened. On the other hand, a few participants in the lower socioeconomic class pointed out that they had experienced alternative forms of work during this period, but they had lost some of their income and therefore had financial difficulties. However, all of the participants belonging to the middle socioeconomic class experienced alternative working styles. A participant in the upper socioeconomic class stated that working online during the pandemic period was a good experience for him, and that he was able to focus more and improve his work in this process, and now he has completely switched to remote working. From what this participant stated, it can be concluded that he turned the pandemic, which was a global crisis, into an opportunity for himself and developed his business, and therefore came out of the pandemic stronger. It has been observed that there were decreases and increases in work intensity in almost every sector. While it was learned that the participants from the upper and middle socioeconomic classes did not experience any economic problems related to the changes in their work intensity, it was observed that there were individuals who faced economic problems, such as loss of income or dismissal, with the decrease in the work intensity among the participants of the lower socioeconomic class.

While low-income workers generally had to continue going to work during the Covid-19 pandemic, people from higher socioeconomic classes were able to stay at home more during the epidemic. As a result of this situation, it has been determined that individuals in low-income socioeconomic groups are more exposed to the negative effects of epidemics and diseases due to existing economic inequalities<sup>29</sup>. In this regard, it has been determined that the number of coronavirus cases is higher in regions where socio-economically lower classes live<sup>30</sup>. The participants were asked whether the measures taken against the pandemic during this period were sufficient and, analyzing the answers given to this question, it was learned that the participants in the lower and middle socioeconomic classes thought that the measures taken were insufficient, while the individuals in the upper socioeconomic class thought that the measures taken were sufficient. Most of the participants who thought that they were able to isolate themselves sufficiently in this process were from the upper socioeconomic class. The common features among these participants was that they did not have to go to work every day, they could do their jobs remotely or that they had enough savings to make a living even though they did not work during the pandemic. Regarding the pandemic period, the participants were asked questions regarding their degree of motivation and the answers given were interesting. During this period, activities such as meditation, yoga, doing sports, working more and being productive, listening to podcasts, and having breakfast in the open air were generally performed as motivation-enhancing activities. The most striking feature of the participants who tended to engage in these motivation-enhancing activities is that they all belong to the upper socioeconomic class. There were also participants who were extremely satisfied with the time they spent at home. A participant in the upper socioeconomic class stated that with the increase in digitalization due to the pandemic in this period, he could visit exhibitions in various parts of the world, watch plays and go to operas. The fact that individuals in other socioeconomic classes did not have such experiences is one of the important findings that reveal the class basis of the pandemic.

Gönç Şavran and Suğur conducted a study on the difference in the level of impact from the Covid-19 pandemic according to social classes. In that study, it is quite difficult to say that the Covid-19 pandemic affects everyone equally in societies where different social segments separated by gender, class and ethnicity live together and some disadvantaged segments coexist. Studies have shown that people with various disadvantages are more likely to get sick during the pandemic period. In addition, disadvantaged individuals, who get a Covid-19, have faced problems such as not being able to eat a balanced diet and not being able to access health services<sup>31</sup>. While more than half of the participants stated that class inequalities increased in this period, there were participants from all three

<sup>29</sup> Sparke and Angelov, 2020.

<sup>30</sup> Bozkurt and Sayın, 2020, p.207.

<sup>31</sup> Gönç Şavran and Suğur, 2021, p.1-2

socioeconomic levels among the participants who stated this. Several of the participants stated that the gap between the lowest and the highest class is gradually increasing and that the middle class is gradually disappearing. Other participants in the middle and upper socioeconomic class considered themselves lucky to be able to experience alternative ways of working during the pandemic period. However, these participants also had the view that social inequalities have increasingly deepened and become more visible during the pandemic period. A participant in the upper socioeconomic class stated that he had stopped doing his job voluntarily in the first three months of the pandemic, lived an isolated life at home, and that he had enough savings to provide for himself and his family in this process. The fact that a similar situation could not be experienced by the participants in the lower socioeconomic class shows another dimension of the class basis of the pandemic. Within the scope of the research, certain questions regarding housework were asked to the participants. Half of the participants from the upper socioeconomic class stated that they had received support from people who provided autonomous cleaning robots or professional cleaning services related to household chores during the pandemic period. It is one of the remarkable findings obtained within the scope of the study that people from the upper socioeconomic class, who are half the number of these people, received three times the cleaning support that the other two classes outside the upper socioeconomic class received for domestic chores.

The pandemic period has also directly affected individuals view of the future. While a significant number of the participants stated that they got used to the normalization process applied during the pandemic period, it was observed that certain participants still had various concerns about the future. Though their experiences and feelings were different, it can be seen that each participant was significantly affected by the pandemic. However, the way in which they were affected and what they gave meaning to are related to their social class. While it was seen that the participants in the lower socioeconomic class generally expressed their views on hygiene and cleanliness, it was observed that the participants in the middle and upper socioeconomic classes also had thoughts about issues such as planning for the future.

Among the questions asked to the participants about their future expectations, alternative working styles were also included. Most of the participants from the middle and upper socioeconomic classes who had experienced flexible working thought that the normal working hours were very long, and that there was a lot of wasted time during this time, whereas their work efficiency increased despite working fewer hours as a result of flexible working practices. Six out of ten respondents from the lower socioeconomic class tended to choose clear working hours in their working lives. Reasons such as working in precarious jobs with unclear working hours, being exposed to ill-treatment and arbitrary practices by employers, and sometimes a lack of clarity as to when their working hours would finish explaining why they had such a tendency. In addition, four of the participants from the lower socioeconomic class stated that they would prefer to work until they had completed a job if they had the chance to choose, while eight of the participants from the middle and upper socioeconomic class stated that they would prefer to work until they had completed a certain job. In this regard, it is quite remarkable that there is a twofold difference between the lower socioeconomic class and the other socioeconomic classes.

Finally, the participants were asked a question regarding the change in current class inequalities and although a number of the participants thought positively about the future, it was generally agreed that it would not be possible to reduce or eliminate class inequalities. A few participants held the view that the difference between the lower and upper socioeconomic classes is almost a law of nature and that it was impossible to eliminate inequality. Based on the statements of the participants, it can be seen that the Covid-19 pandemic only reveals the inequalities that already exist in society, and that awareness against it has increased, but that the inequalities continue to exist, perhaps even more than before. Moreover, it was observed that the participants belonging to the lower socioeconomic class generally had a more pessimistic attitude towards reducing inequalities and did not have many positive thoughts about the future.

### **Conclusion**

In this study, how individuals from different socioeconomic classes experienced the Covid-19 pandemic, and whether each socioeconomic class was equally affected by the pandemic in this process,

is examined from a critical point of view. In the study, in-depth interviews were conducted with participants from different socioeconomic classes using qualitative research methods. Based on the data obtained from the interviews, the ways in which individuals from different socioeconomic classes were affected by the pandemic during the pandemic period, and the effects of the coronavirus pandemic on social inequalities, were investigated. In this regard, one of the objectives of the research is to differentiate the ways in which individuals from different socioeconomic classes were affected by the Covid-19 pandemic and to reveal the extent of this differentiation.

During the Covid-19 pandemic, individuals from the lower socioeconomic class who had no change in their working conditions had to work even when there were curfews and for those who did not have the opportunity to experience alternative working methods such as flexible working and rotating work, or working less hours, financial loss was observed. When we look at the distribution of the participants who lost their income during the pandemic period, the number of those from the lower socioeconomic class who lost their income is equal to the total number of those in the middle and upper socioeconomic class who lost their income. In other words, people from the lower socioeconomic class experienced twice the loss of income compared to those in the other two classes. The statement made by the International Labour Organization (ILO) also confirms this. According to the International Labour Organization, approximately 225 million people lost their jobs globally in 2020 due to the Covid-19 pandemic<sup>32</sup>. If we look at the situation specifically in Turkey, according to a study conducted by the International Labour Organization, it was stated that 1 in 5 young people experienced employment loss in April and May 2020, and this process continued until September in the same year.<sup>33</sup> During this period, although millions of people did not lose their jobs, they experienced a loss in their income or were worried about losing it. During this period, economic losses and concerns, together with the panic environment, caused social traumas to emerge. However, with technological developments, many white-collar workers experienced being able to do their jobs from home during quarantine periods.<sup>34</sup> Furthermore, in this study, it was observed that the participants from the lower socioeconomic class experienced more job losses than the participants from the other socioeconomic class in terms of actual job loss as well as income loss, while it was seen that this situation drained individuals not only financially but also psychologically. While it was understood that alternative forms of work such as remote working and flexible working were generally experienced by the upper and middle socioeconomic classes during the Covid-19 pandemic process, these individuals stated that they were able to isolate themselves against the pandemic in their responses. While the participants from the lower socioeconomic class expressed that they could not isolate themselves well, drawing attention to reasons such as not being able to apply alternative working styles, having to be in crowded public transportation or working environments, and not being able to rest or eat well. Moreover, when the participants were asked about their experiences with domestic work during this period, it was determined that the support received by both the participants from the lower and middle socioeconomic class regarding domestic work (autonomous cleaning robots or people who provided professional cleaning services) was received by the upper socioeconomic class, which is half the number of these people. This is one of the remarkable items of data obtained within the scope of the study. This is because, even in the period when people had to spend more time at home than ever, individuals in the upper socioeconomic class continued their lives by receiving abundant support for domestic chores compared to individuals in other classes.

In conclusion, while it can be seen that individuals from different socioeconomic classes experienced the pandemic process in different ways and were affected by the pandemic in different ways, it is seen that the coronavirus was not at an equal distance to everyone as it was claimed in the early days. It has been determined that the experiences of individuals belonging to different socioeconomic classes are different in various aspects such as being able to protect themselves financially and psychologically against the pandemic, getting enough rest to protect their physical and mental health, to be resistant to the pandemic and that, in fact, even in a global pandemic, the basis of everything is to do with social class. In addition, it can be concluded that the social inequalities existing

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<sup>32</sup> International Labour Organization, 2021.

<sup>33</sup> ILO, 2020, p.3.

<sup>34</sup> Kurtdaş, 2020, p.538.

in the modern capitalist social structure we are already in became more visible with the effect of the pandemic, social inequalities deepened in this period, and the gap between socioeconomic classes gradually widened. In parallel with this, one of the objectives of this study is to draw attention to the problems of the lower socioeconomic class, especially those who could not ‘stay at home’ during the pandemic period, and to the increasing social inequalities in this process. In this context, one of the objectives of the research has been achieved and what needs to be done next is to produce effective and visionary policies to reduce the impact of social inequalities. The Covid-19 pandemic, which created a global crisis, caused millions of people to die and billions of people to be directly affected, made us see how wearing and compelling the existing social inequalities are. In this respect, the Covid-19 pandemic can be considered as an opportunity that offers important outputs for the production of long-term systematic solutions to the inequalities in the social structure.

While there are various policies that need to be implemented in a short time, the foremost of these is the improvement of the working conditions of workers. In this period, it has been seen that working hours in many workplaces are actually much longer than they should be. After this process, it has been determined that employees can adapt to alternative working styles and do their current jobs much more efficiently. While it is thought that the alternative working forms implemented during the pandemic period will be implemented from now on and will increase work efficiency, it is thought that at the same time, employees can create much more time for themselves and their families, so that these practices can contribute to individual happiness and therefore social peace. The Covid-19 pandemic has made it possible to see how vulnerable people who work for minimum wage or work without security are exposed to social risks. Another important point to be noted in this context is the need to develop protective, supportive and inclusive policies to ensure the minimum livelihood of these groups.

While focusing on the different effects of the pandemic on various socioeconomic classes with this study, which was carried out when the Covid-19 pandemic had lost its effect and was about to be forgotten, the aim is to draw attention to the fact that similar pandemics await us in the future. This study is important in terms of not only identifying a situation, but also guiding the production of appropriate policies regarding this situation, being prepared for potential pandemics awaiting us in the future and planning future projections for them.

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