

Program Script for Changemaker Dr. Zeynep Şimşek (Aired on 4 October 2009)

Category: Health

Location: Southeastern Turkey (Şanlıurfa)

The infinite blue of the sky meets the infinite yellow of the land. The sun is as powerful as it can burn the land and the land is as fertile as it is burnt. As we get closer to Şanlıurfa, we begin to understand that the fate of this city is determined by the land.

Although it is usually the picture of Balıklıgöl (a famous lake) that is reflected to Turkey from Şanlıurfa, it is the profoundness of the cracked land of Harran Plains that reflects on the faces of Şanlıurfa's people.

20% of 472.000 people who live in Urfa are migrant farm workers in the Harran Plain's fertile lands. Families start migrating during the month of February and the migration lasts until November-December. During this period, agricultural fields where workers make a living become their shelters and homes.

Words and images seem stolen from another era. In order to really understand the working and living conditions of migrant farm workers one has to go in the fields and step on the same land.

This is a cotton field in the seemingly infinite plain of Harran. And these tents are the houses, living rooms, guest rooms, bathrooms and toilets of 4 families who will be working here for many months.

All families almost follow the same path when going to pick cotton that grows in the fields. They build a world for themselves in their tents made out of canvas and bend to the land toward the whiteness of cotton.

However, the whiteness of cotton does not suffice to cover up the darkness of their sorrow. They live in the worst possible conditions. They are unable to find clean potable water and clean themselves in a healthy manner and use hygienic toilet facilities.

Interview with Woman making bread:

Interviewer- What are you cooking?

Women -Bread

Interviewer-For how many days would this suffice?

Women -These thin dough will suffice for 1 month. You know we have to go pick up cotton from the fields.

Interviewer-Do you always live in the fields?

Women-Yes. We go to Adana (another city) and then we come here for cotton. That's how we live.

Interviewer -Is there a kitchen here?

Women -No, there is no kitchen here. We all live in the same tent.

Interviewer - What is there to eat?

Women-Potatoes, rice, bread. That's what we eat.

-My husband married two women. My fellow wife and I are working here. Here she is.

Interviewer -How old are you?

Women-I don't know

Interview with Farmer:

Farmer-We are working from 5 in the morning to 7 in the evening.

Interviewer -Don't you get tired?

Farmer -Yes we do but we have to make a living. One person collects 70-100 kilos of cotton per day. And with that we make 10 to 15 liras a day (approx. 8 to 12 USD). I collect a little more so I make around 20 liras.

Interviewer -What type of diseases do you encounter?

Farmer -Headache, blood pressure, diabetes. These are the most common ones.

Although they seem to accept these unhealthy conditions, there still are people in Urfa who want to help migrant farm workers live a better life. There are people who want to contribute to the life of migrant farm workers and create a better tomorrow for women and children.

After working for years in the Ministry of Health in Turkey, Dr. Zeynep Şimşek decided to completely change her life one day in order to pursue her ideals. She accepted Harran University's proposal in 2001. Leaving her life in the capital city of Ankara behind, she and moved to Urfa with her husband.

Her first mission in Harran University was to set up the Division of Public Health. While continuing her academic work in Urfa, Dr. Zeynep Şimşek also tried to observe the challenges that people in her community were facing when trying to find solutions to these problems.

Dr. Zeynep Şimşek : "As soon as I started my work here, I realized that people in the less developed areas of Urfa work 7 to 8 months in a year in 24 different cities as migrant farm workers. Some leave their homes around the 15th of February. This amounts to 10% of total workers. Some leave in the beginning of March, which accounts to another 10%. But, by the beginning of April, almost 90% of all workers are out in 24 different cities across Turkey to work in the fields. Around the 15th of November, they come back to their homes. For 7 to 8 months, a family works in 3 different cities on average. Therefore they live on the fields for 7 to 8 months. On the fields, they live in tents made out of canvas or briquette. They do not have toilets. They seek potable water from nearby villages, from a river or a well. They use pesticide and of course they make the pesticide themselves. Therefore all family members are exposed to pesticide. Very frequently they get bit by scorpions, bugs and snakes. We

saw that the Sabancı Foundation and the United Nations Joint Program initiated a grant program. We thought, "Why don't we submit a project? With the help of this project, let's try to get to know these people. And let's offer them mobile health care."

In order to transform her observations in the fields to more scientific data, Dr. Zeynep Şimşek started comprehensive fieldwork with her research team. According to research conducted in the districts of Şanlıurfa where approximately 150.000 agricultural workers are living:

Women who are working in the fields conceive 6 times on average, 44% of them experience miscarriage at least once, 30% experience stillbirth at least once and 49% of them give birth either on the fields or at home.

The condition of children who participated in the research is even worse. 50% of them were insufficiently or never vaccinated and 39% were suffering from malnutrition.

In the light of this data, Dr. Zeynep Şimşek , along with her project partner. Dr. İbrahim Koruk started working on improving the health conditions of migrant farm workers. And this was the first step in a comprehensive project initiated by Dr. Zeynep Şimşek that involved actors from Harran University to the Governorship of Urfa.

Şimşek proposed the purchase of mobile healthcare vehicles in order to offer health services to agricultural workers in the fields. And in order to realize this project, she involved the entire bureaucracy in Urfa.

Dr. Zeynep Şimşek : "We involved the Health Council of the city of Şanlıurfa. We said that we needed mobile healthcare vehicles. I raised the issue to all governmental agencies in the city. I made a presentation to the Provincial Council explaining the reasons behind the awful health conditions of women and children and the low ratio of educated population. I argued that we have to set up a health care system that focuses on migrant farm workers. With unanimous decision, we got the funding to purchase these mobile healthcare vehicles. We designed them individually and decided on what needs to be in them. We planned our budget and purchased 4 mobile healthcare vehicles. This was achieved with the funding of the Provincial Council. We also appointed healthcare personnel to work in these vehicles. And today, there are 4 fully equipped mobile healthcare vehicles active in the fields and villages."

The mobile healthcare vehicles each cost 250.000 Liras (approx. 170.000 USD) and are operating under the Municipal Health Office. Every morning, each vehicle picks up a doctor, a nurse and a midwife to go to their respective districts where they are based.

Although the fields are far away from the city, these vehicles are not bound by distance or limits. Once these vehicles arrive to the fields, there seems to be a 'health fest' among temporary workers.

The doctors' primary targets are women and children. Women who have never seen a doctor before that day get a check up and children who have never been vaccinated experience the ache in their arms for the first time.

Dr.Koruk, while teaching the workers how to use chlorine tablets:

Dr. Koruk-Once you put this table in the water, it dissolves in approximately 20-29 minutes and cleans the water. In almost an hour, it will be clean and safe to drink.

Interview with Dr. Koruk

Dr. Koruk: "We come across many skin diseases due to exposure to the sun. Being in open field and sun also triggers many health problems. Heat strokes are an important matter. Furthermore, bug, mosquito and in some places snakebites are very frequently encountered. On the other hand, it is a big issue that these people do not have access to clean water. This triggers diarrhea. Again, as we are in the fields, these people do not have access to electricity and refrigerators. This causes malnutrition problems. Consequently, many kids suffer from growth deficiencies.

Mobile Health Unit Doctor doing a check-up:

Woman -My stomach hurts.

Doctor -Where does it hurt?

Woman -Here.

Doctor -Here?

Woman -Yes.

Doctor -Can you lie down please?

Doctor -This is a patient we follow on a regular basis.

Interviewer -She is pregnant right?

Doctor -Yes she is. She should not be working in the fields as she is 7-monhts pregnant. But she is working due to financial difficulties. Therefore we offer them health services here in the fields. We are trying to raise awareness on the topic.

Interviewer -Are you in a bad condition?

Woman -Now I am fine. But whenever I work in the fields I don't feel well.

Interviewer -You are pregnant right? Is it not hard to work at the same time?

Woman -Well, it is my job.

Interviewer -How old are you?

Woman -I don't know.

Interviewer -You were pregnant for 7 months. Is this the first time you were treated?

Woman -Yes.

This project that was initiated with an idea of Dr. Zeynep Şimşek , and flourished with the contribution of many people in Urfa. It was realized through dedicated efforts, and has been successfully operating for approximately 6 months. Although we may think that projects and efforts like this can only happen in places like Europe or abroad, such beautiful projects can also take place in Urfa with the dedication of hearts and minds of socially responsible people.

Interview: Nuri Okutan (Governor of Urfa)

Nuri Okutan: " This service has been active for 6 months. We served 225.000 people until now. We medically examined 15.000 citizens. With the help of this service, we meet people and we interact with them. Reaching 225.000 people and talking to them on health issues is a very important service.

This service provided us the opportunity to reach 15.000 of our citizens in remote areas and offer them proper medical services. We have a lab where we can do an instant blood test. These vehicles are as equipped as a health care centre. We send urgent cases to hospitals and in case of need we call an ambulance. Mobile healthcare vehicles either stay in that village or field or move on the next according to the situation. But in case of an emergency, we send our patients directly to a hospital, where they are treated according to their needs."

The change created by this medical service is first and foremost reflected on the faces of migrant farm workers and their children. Children, just as tall as the cotton stalks, who are seeking a future for themselves in the fields understand that they are no different than other children in the eyes of the government as they have access to treatment and vaccination.

The energy from their smiling faces also reflects positively on the research undertaken to measure the impact of this project. According to the results of the research conducted from mobile healthcare vehicles:

96% of families learned to chlorinate their drinking water and started using clean water thanks to complimentary chlorine tablets given to them.

93% built proper toilet facilities.

56% of children were vaccinated for the first time and included to a vaccination program.

56% of babies were examined.

Dr. Zeynep Şimşek initiated a project. She worked in pursuit of a better tomorrow. She contributed in the lives of people she never met. She sacrificed her days for it. She never expected anything in return while doing it. She never gave up just so one more children can smile happily in the fields. And she made a difference in people's lives.

Dr. Zeynep Şimşek : "We worked very hard. We got really exhausted. We changed the entire system in a sense. If everyone is willing to give their all to a cause, they can make a huge difference in their community."