

Program Script for Melek Erman Koni (Aired on 13 December 2009)

Category: Education

Location: Istanbul

According to the Republic of Turkey Ministry of National Education, **there are 4 million 930 thousand people who are illiterate within the borders of Turkey.**

What is even more upsetting is that 3 million 850 thousand of these are women. In other words, there are approximately 4 million illiterate women in Turkey.

Unfortunately, there are more statistics to describe the tragic situation of women:

21% of literate women never attended an educational institute.

37% have an elementary school diploma, while 7% graduated from junior middle school, %10 from high school and only 4% received education at the university level.

These statistics do not look good on a TV screen, and their reflection on women’s lives is even worse.

Illiterate women are most often subjected to violence and are economically and emotionally dependent on others.

These women cannot identify which room they have to go to, or the bus that they need to take. In other words, they cannot fully participate in social life.

This is not only their problem, however. It is our collective problem.

It is always the easiest option to point the finger at the government as the main reason behind this problem. However, some Changemaking people do not wait for the government to approach each and every problem and are making a huge difference in other people’s lives.

Melek Erman Koni is a successful businesswoman. What makes her stand out is that she spends her energy not only on her professional career, but also on social projects.

Koni has been actively working for the Association in Support of Contemporary Living (ASCL) and the Mother Child Education Foundation (MCEF).

She is also the founder of the Besiktas branch of the ASCL. While volunteering for these NGOs, Koni decided to start working even more closely with people in need.

Although she has never been to Esenler, she knew that it was a district that received a great number of migrants coming from Eastern and Southeastern Turkey.

With the help of her friends, Koni decided on Esenler as the pilot area and started her field research on women living in the district.

As the field research revealed the very low level of literacy among women in Esenler, Koni and her friends decided to establish the Melek Erman Koni Education and Culture Center with the support of the ASCL.

Interview with Melek Erman Koni:

Melek Erman Koni: “We could not find attendees for literacy courses we were offering in some districts. Sisli and Besiktas are some of these districts. In Esenler, however, people were queueing up in front of the community center. Our teacher of literacy, Yasemin Ersoy, was a course attendee herself.

We chose this district thanks to her suggestion. Umraniye and Esenler were chosen as pilot areas. We felt the need to establish a community center here because there were no other available locations in the district. Neither the state could provide it, nor educational institutes could allocate a classroom. Each class in these institutes consisted of 60-70 students. This is a very densely populated region that received a great number of migrants. As it is very close to the intercity bus terminal, most newly-arriving migrants from Eastern and Southeastern Turkey decide to settle here. Therefore, there is a huge potential for literacy courses here.”

Melek Erman Koni Education and Culture Center is designed just like a private educational institute. The only difference is that besides children, mothers can also receive education here and that all of their services are complimentary.

While adults are offered literacy courses, children enroll in preschool education programs. There is also an education program in order to support fathers. Thereby, all family members can receive the education they need at the Center.

Interview with a literacy course attendee:

Interviewer: Why couldn’t you go to school as a child?

Woman: Our father did not allow me to, because he feared that the teacher could be male. We learned Arabic at the time, but could not speak any Turkish.

Interviewer: Aren’t you angry with him because you could not learn how to read and write?

Woman: Yes, of course! I am very angry with him because he did not send us to school. I sent all my children to school. I felt sad that I am uneducated and attended this course to learn, even at this age. Before, I did not know how to spell my name, any telephone numbers...Now, I learned how to read and write in 3 weeks.

Interviewer: What kinds of problems did you encounter before?

Woman: My daughter was sick. We had to go to the hospital for 20 years, on and off. Everyday I had to ask people where rooms that I needed to go to were. It was very difficult. Many times I entered a doctor’s office, thinking it was the staff room. It was written on the door but I could not read it. Now I can do all of that by myself. It is a great thing. It was as I wasn’t able to see until now.

Interviewer: Do you feel stronger as a woman?

Woman: So much stronger! I can stand up against anyone!

Interviewer: What are your aspirations for the future?

Woman: I want to become a member of parliament! (People laughing). I will become one if I can get my certificate from here.

Interviewer: Do you want to keep on learning? *Woman:* Of course, why would I ever stop? God willing, I will always keep on learning new things. It’s a beautiful thing, it opened my eyes to the world.

Interview with another literacy course attendee:

Woman: “It’s great. I completed 10% of the course until now and I did not know how to read and write at all before that. I went to the hospital and underwent an operation, but I did not heal properly. I did not understand Turkish, I had no idea about what the doctor was telling me. Teachers here are very good in teaching. My sister attended a literacy course for 2 years but did not learn much. Here, we learn very fast as everything is explained to us clearly.”

Interview with another literacy course attendee:

Interviewer: You could not attend school as a child?

Woman: No, we were not allowed to. That’s the reason we came here immediately after hearing about it. We did not know where to go, which public transportation vehicle to take when going somewhere...Now we do, or rather we will learn how to.

Interviewer: What changed in your life since you came here?

Woman: We know how to spell our names now, we now which public transportation vehicle to take.

Each literacy course at the Center lasts for about 4 months. There is an examination at the end of each cycle, and students are awarded a certificate depending on their success at the examination.

Although literacy courses accept both male and female attendees, only women signed up for it until today.

Interview with another literacy course attendee:

Woman: We are 11 brothers and sisters. As a child, they did not want to send me to school. I am the fourth child out of eleven. My younger siblings went to school but I couldn’t. That’s why I applied here, I want to learn how to read and write.

Interviewer: What kinds of problems did you encounter before?

Woman: I did not know where to go in a hospital, did not know what public transportation vehicle to take, did not know the names of streets...Those are the things we want to learn.

Interview with an educator:

Interviewer: What kind of changes do course attendees experience after learning to read and write?

Educator: They gain self-confidence, they get braver. Their lives become much easier.

I had a student who made a bet with her husband on if she can learn how to read and write or not. She followed our instructions successfully and won a very nice present from her husband.

Interviewer: Is it only women who can attend these courses, or can men sign up for them also?

Educator: There weren’t any men who applied to us yet. It is mostly young girls, middle-age women, actually women from all age groups attend our courses. I learn so many things from them here. It is also such a great thing to teach someone something. I am very glad I can do that. I will do it for as many years as my health allows me to.

All educators in the ASCL Melek Erman Koni Education and Culture Center consist of volunteers. Educators who work professionally in other institutions, university students dedicate their time, minds and most importantly, their hearts in order to educate people in need.

Interview with Melek Erman Koni:

Melek Erman Koni: “We have an army of volunteers who became eligible to teach by attending a seminar at the MCEF. These volunteers are the ones who teach. University students who receive a scholarship from the ASCL help us with our afterschool program. Istanbul Kultur University showed us a great deal of support. They especially help us with our summer schools and art classes such as dance, music and drama.”

At the ASCL Melek Erman Koni Education and Culture Center, there are more services being offered other than educational ones. Course attendees also receive complimentary health services such as medical consultations.

They are also offered social activities such as trips to the museum, theater and concerts. Children of families who attend the Center are also offered scholarships if they want to go to university. They work very hard at the Center in order to help them attend university.

Interview with an afterschool program attendee:

Girl: “We study here for an hour everyday. We go over what we learnt at school. We learn more here than we do at school. I am way more successful at school compared to last year. The Center helped me improve my grades.”

Interview with the mother of an afterschool program attendee:

Woman: “My daughter’s name is Merve Aras. She graduated from middle school, but her father wanted her to work instead of attending high school. For a week, my daughter did not eat, nor did she say a word. She was constantly crying. When I was introduced to the Center, I explained them how my daughter was unable to go to school. They bought her clothes, signed her up for school, supported her. Now, God willing, she will become an English language teacher. Her teachers helped her out a lot. Everyone loved her, because she was respectful, studious, hardworking...She is very happy now, and so am I. Both of our lives changed for the better.”

Interview with Melek Erman Koni:

Melek Erman Koni: “We provide middle school graduates with scholarships and assist them in preparing for the university student selection examination. We help them enroll in the high school they want. These are small but effective things. Some students cannot follow if they are accepted to the high school they want to attend. Their families can’t follow the process properly, they cannot use the internet either. We helped many children enroll in vocational high schools that they wanted to attend.”

This educational oasis has been actively serving Esenler since its establishment in 2007. Although it encountered some difficulties, the Center showed great success with the help of its dedicated volunteers and donors who believe in the power of education.

Interview with Melek Erman Koni:

Melek Erman Koni: “My first concern was about how to reach people, how to attract children to our Center. Yasemin, however, helped me out a lot in that matter. She told me that the project was really great and that everyone who hears about it will want to attend it. She was right; we take 300 course attendees every cycle. Most of these consist of

families. We have a waiting list of 250-300 applicants. If we had two more of this community center, we are going to be able to offer all services we want.”

This project did not only make a difference in the lives of inhabitants of Esenler; it also transformed Melek Erman Koni’s life entirely.

Interview with Melek Erman Koni:

Melek Erman Koni: “It’s something that adds some value to your life, it helps you get out of the routine. I am in the business sector which is driven by profit. In such an environment, human soul cannot be properly fed. Social work adds value to my life. To fight inequality of opportunity and to observe the change for the better in people gives me such a great pleasure. To witness how someone who was illiterate before meeting can read and write after attending the Center gives me an exceptional satisfaction.

I feel great. I want to expand this project, contribute more in financial terms and reach more people in collaboration with other organizations. As the project makes me feel very good, I guess it makes me just want to do more and more for it.

My perception of life, my standards of judgement and things that I value changed entirely. Fighting inequality of opportunity and discovering hidden talents satisfies me greatly. It is almost impossible to feel this type of satisfaction in any other fields of life. Especially after getting older and maturing, things human value go through severe changes. You have to find a good activity that causes this change and that changes your priorities.”

Years ago, Melek Erman Koni was only a businesswoman. Her life was valued in monetary terms.

Unlike everyone around her, she decided to listen to her inner voice and change the lives of people in need without expecting anything in return.

She had faith in the joy in their eyes and made a huge difference in the lives of thousands that will last for many generations.