

TODAY'S ZAMAN

American expert calls on Turkish mothers to speak out to break cycle of poverty

In a dark flat that has windows level with the street outside, you are left without the privilege of much sunlight.



And the beautiful sky, which is supposed to be open to every creature under it, seems like part of another world while you are in this room, deep down at the bottom of the neighborhood's towering row of blocks.

Two walls that have been stripped of their paint, apparently due to humidity, welcome you to the sitting room of what Şerife calls home for her family of seven. It is only her big eyes that shine in the dim light coming from the street in İstanbul's Yenibosna quarter, which is divorced from wealthy Ataköy only by a highway, which was also where her father was killed when he was hit by a car, leaving her orphaned at a very young age.

The lights are switched off, probably to save money on the electricity bill. A mother of five, Şerife Özten hesitates when asked how old she is. She stopped counting her age long ago and just gives a date, which makes her only 32, an age that would just be the beginning of life for some women. In addition to having her children, the oldest being 13 and youngest 3, she has to earn a living because her husband can't work having a partially paralyzed left leg and arm. Her 11-year-old daughter has to look after her 3-year-old girl, and the other children, while their mother is at work, kick a ball on the streets as there are no open spaces around to play in, unlike the streets on the other side of the highway.

The closer you get to Şerife's life, the more she becomes a Turkish personification of what American expert Mariana Chilton, an assistant professor of health policy at Drexel University who frequently gives testimony on hunger in the US Congress, calls “a vortex of negative events” involving “a trade-off” mothers have to make on a daily basis. She is not the only mother who needs to work but cannot do so because there is no place to put the children and who also needs to find ways to feed them. There are also American mothers fighting the same battle. Their fight with poverty and hunger has been a given voice by epidemiologist Chilton by using very simple means -- cameras. She told them to take photos of their everyday life. They did and caught so much attention that the exhibition “Witnesses to Hunger” ended up at the US Senate in Washington, D.C. “Turkish mothers can learn from the courage of American mothers. Grab a camera; take pictures that people cannot deny. It is hard for people to ignore photos,” Chilton tells Turkish mothers who are living on the edge of deprivation in a phone interview with Sunday's Zaman. Reminding people that “motherhood is universal,” Chilton underlines that “every mother, if given an opportunity, fights to keep her children safe, alive, growing and thriving. But she needs the support of all of us to help make sure she can do this.” Chilton

decided to investigate the stories that go along with the numbers after conducting five years of research on hunger.

After her lengthy research into the subject, Chilton realized that poverty and hunger should be given a voice in order to break the cycle that deprives mothers from taking good care of their children. She decided to give cameras to poor American women to show the reality behind the facts and figures. Forty women from the backyard of her wealthy neighborhood in Philadelphia participated in the project to tell to the world of their struggle with hunger, poverty and deprivation, which has been caused by a “failure in the system,” not because they deserve their fate. The project, which grabbed a huge amount of attention from the US media and politicians, also has things to say to Turkish mothers who are ignored in their poor neighborhoods.

What it can tell us is that “mothers have enormous power if only they were given the opportunity to speak and to show the world their potential.” This is the reason why the initiative, which began as a photographic exhibition on poverty, turned into a project that landed at the House of Representatives in Washington as a briefing and as an exhibition at the US Senate. “I think what people are responding to is the brilliance these people have,” Chilton says of the American mothers who participated in the project. “Mothers are true experts when it comes to poverty. It is not a legislator, a researcher or a policy maker. So it is very raw, and it grabs your attention,” she adds. Seeing that poverty can be anywhere, Turkish mothers, though to a different degree than their American counterparts, can be inspired to make their fight more visible. Because no matter whether they are born to Turkish or American mothers, in the end “a child that is born is equal, a part of the same human family, so are the mothers,” says Chilton, a mother of three.

“I believe people in the middle class and upper middle class have attitudes towards poor women that poor women are not smart and they deserve their fate. I believe the opposite,” says Chilton, who is white, Harvard educated and married to a nuclear physicist, but is still able to relate to the everyday consequences of poverty on the women whose stories are being told through her work. Instead of putting the blame on the fate of poor people, which would be a way of avoiding responsibility, she opted to spend a \$100,000 award on cameras distributed to the witnesses. But what these photos taken by the mothers themselves reveal is not “children with swollen bellies and big eyes with flies around them, which is the first thing that comes to an average American's mind” when they think of poverty, according to Chilton.

“Very young children are like canaries in the mines in that they, too, are especially vulnerable to social and environmental insults. Often evidence of harm can be seen in young children, especially young low-income children,” says Children's HealthWatch, a Boston-based institution that conducts research on children's health. And that is why Chilton and other mothers decided to do something about it. In her words, “no one will break it to us except the true experts on poverty and hunger -- the mothers who know it firsthand.” Through the brave steps these mothers take, the difficult choices that these mothers have to make at the expense of their and their children's welfare emerges, things that can leave a child with less food, and therefore, more diseases: deciding between paying the bills or the rent or buying food or formula. When you pay your rent, besides the bills, is there enough left to buy Pampers? OK, then skip this month's rent payment, but you are now in danger of not being able to provide a safe and proper home for your children. Why not try to find a job? Sounds easy. Will what you get from your work be enough to pay for

daycare? If you cannot work, how on earth will you be able to buy the milk and vegetables and supply your children with the necessary nutrition, a safe home and good education? What if you are a single mother as is the case with most of the women in “Witnesses to Hunger” or a married mother in an abusive relationship? Or like Tianna Gaines, who eats noodles herself in order to feed her twins and her toddler chicken. But you might end up in an emergency room suffering from diseases caused by lack of nutrition. And who will look after your babies when you are sick?

Bringing attention to the trade-offs that mothers are forced to make every day, Chilton says, “No mother should have to trade in this primordial concern for anything less.”

But Barbie Izquierdo, who participated in “Witnesses to Hunger,” has to do so. She pays \$400 for housing and \$80 for daycare. This 21-year-old American woman takes two busses to work for a total of \$268 every week. She pays \$54 for the phone, \$60 for electricity, \$80 on Pampers and baby wipes and \$80 for transportation, reports the Associated Press, which did an extensive story on “Witnesses to Hunger.” That budget leaves her without the necessary amount of money she needs for food. According to the US government, to feed a family with two children, you need \$676, says the Associated Press.

Thousands of miles away from Barbie, Emine Altun's experiences are no different from hers. Turkey and the United States, oceans apart in terms of gross domestic product (GDP) per capita (According to 2008 World Bank data, the per capita figure is \$46,859 in the US, while it is \$10,472 in Turkey). Altun, though she says she is a bit luckier because she has a house of her own, is working at a daycare center for only TL 300 in return for the care given to her children in the center. TL 300 is also the total amount of money she pays for her bills. Being able to take her two sons with her to the work relieves her. It is also the argument she uses when her husband challenges her going to work. “But I want to work. I want my sons to be educated,” she says.

“Hunger and deprivation are about a failure in the system of entitlements -- entitlements such as access to health care, access to food, access to education for a mother and her children,” according to Chilton, who introduces us to well-known economist Amartya Sen's theory. Sen, who won a Nobel Prize in 1998 for his work on the economics of famine, says even impoverished societies can improve the well-being of their least advantaged members. In his “entitlement approach,” the economist shifts attention from questions of food availability to questions of distribution.

When a mother who is primarily responsible for bringing up her children is not supported by the necessary means to look after her children, or in Sen's terms, if she is not given access to food, health care and support, it is the children who first pay the price with their bodies being below average in weight and height and with more frequent visits to hospitals, with a lower rate of cognitive skills. The lack of food and necessary nutrition stunts a child's physical and mental growth. But the lack of entitlement and the trade-off that low-income mothers have to make does not stop there. The force of a cycle that spirals downward begins, at some point, to affect the people at the center of this “no access to food, health care, education” vortex. One of the photos featuring a kitchen streaked with dirt functions as a reminder for her that poverty is “something more than the amount of food in your stomach.” It is rather the life that exists all around them, “a

vortex of very negative experiences,” Chilton explained to the Associated Press.

Şerife, who is a perfect example of how this downward spiral can knock a mother and her children down, says it has been months since her children drank milk regularly. With only TL 250 they get from the state fund, there remains nothing left for food. Already two months behind on their TL 300 rent, she can't wait to receive her first paycheck, which is only TL 450 from her first job in a sweatshop with no social security coverage. “I do not want to leave my children alone,” she says, “but what can I do?”

‘My biggest son hasn't had any milk since the schools closed’

“Some people may want us to believe that poverty and hunger will always be there. But the cycle of poverty can be broken,” Chilton said from Philadelphia during our interview. She acknowledges that “it is hard to find a way to speak out about how things are.” But she asks, “If you don't have courage, how can you expect your children to have the courage to grow and do great things?” And if we do not bring attention to it and make people do something about it now, how can Ayşe, Şerife's 11-year-old daughter, who is now carrying the enormous burden of being like a mother to her sister, break this cycle and have a good future?

Talking about another example of poverty similar to Şerife's, Chilton said: “The sad thing about this woman is that she has children that are exactly the same age as mine. An important realization I had when I was young was that I could have been born into any family, any place in the world, any place on the earth. I could have been this mother. My children could have been her children. How could our fates be so different? There is no justice in where we are born.”

23.08.2009

News

PINAR TAŞ