

IMPACT OF COVID-19 OUTBREAKS ON MIGRANT WORKERS

IMPACTO DOS SURTOS DE COVID-19 NOS TRABALHADORES MIGRANTES

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Abstract

In March 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared COVID-19 an epidemic, causing a public health emergency of international concern. Despite the outbreak of the COVID-19 epidemic, the migration of seasonal agricultural workers was exceptionally allowed in Turkey, as the labor force of seasonal agricultural workers is a crucial factor in the Turkish agricultural economy. Since seasonal workers are employed as temporary irregular workers, they obtain information from brokers (*Çavuşlar*) about farms that require workers. They worked on farms for five to six months while migrating according to the information. The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic has become a very threatening obstacle to those who live a migrant life. Nevertheless, they are forced to continue migrating agricultural labor due to their economic situation. In Turkey, 90% of seasonal agricultural workers live in the Southeastern Anatolia region, where they make a living from seasonal agricultural work without having other jobs. In particular, Şanlıurfa Province has the highest proportion of seasonal workers, even in the Southeastern Anatolia region. Therefore, Şanlıurfa Province, where we interviewed workers engaged in seasonal agricultural labor, was selected as the survey area. The interviews were conducted with seasonal workers from four households (total of 33 people) engaged in seasonal work during the period from May to October 2020. We utilized semi-structured, face-to-face in-depth interviews and telephone interviews with workers as the data collection methods. In this study, since the investigator who interviewed seasonal workers was a worker engaged in seasonal agricultural labor, in-depth interviews with seasonal workers were possible despite the COVID-19 pandemic. This study investigated the geographical mobility routes of migrants during that time. In addition, we examined how their living and working conditions changed and were affected by the COVID-19 pandemic and what efforts were needed to improve their conditions. As a result of these studies, the emergence of COVID-19 has worsened working and living conditions, and it has been shown that it is urgent to prepare countermeasures against infectious diseases for vulnerable people.

Keywords: Turkey, seasonal agricultural workers, migration, COVID-19.

Resumo:

Em março de 2020, a Organização Mundial da Saúde (OMS) declarou a COVID-19 uma epidemia, causando uma emergência de saúde pública de preocupação internacional. Apesar do surto da epidemia de COVID-19, na Turquia, a migração de trabalhadores agrícolas sazonais foi excepcionalmente permitida, uma vez que a força de trabalho dos trabalhadores agrícolas sazonais é um fator crucial na economia agrícola do país. Na Turquia, os trabalhadores agrícolas sazonais são empregados como trabalhadores temporários irregulares e estes obtêm informações junto dos corretores (*Çavuşlar*), sobre as explorações agrícolas que necessitam de trabalhadores. Assim, eles trabalharam nas fazendas durante cinco a seis meses, e migravam de acordo com as informações dos corretores.

O surto da pandemia da COVID-19 tornou-se um obstáculo muito ameaçador para estes trabalhadores que vivem uma vida de migrantes. Foram forçados a continuar a migrar como mão-de-obra agrícola, devido à sua situação económica. Na Turquia, 90% dos trabalhadores agrícolas sazonais vivem na região sudeste da Anatólia, onde vivem do trabalho agrícola sazonal, sem terem outros empregos. Em particular, a província de Şanlıurfa tem a maior proporção de trabalhadores sazonais, na região sudeste da Anatólia. Portanto, esta província, foi selecionada como área de pesquisa para entrevistarmos trabalhadores envolvidos no trabalho agrícola sazonal. As entrevistas foram realizadas com trabalhadores sazonais de quatro agregados familiares (total de 33 pessoas), durante o período de maio a outubro de 2020. Utilizamos entrevistas semiestruturadas presenciais e entrevistas telefónicas com os trabalhadores, como os métodos de coleta de dados. Neste estudo, uma vez que o investigador que entrevistou os trabalhadores sazonais era um trabalhador envolvido em trabalho agrícola sazonal, foram possíveis entrevistas aprofundadas, apesar da pandemia de COVID-19. Este estudo investigou as rotas geográficas de mobilidade dos migrantes durante esse período. Além

disso, pesquisou-se sobre, de que forma as suas condições de vida e de trabalho mudaram e foram afetadas pela pandemia de COVID-19, assim como, os esforços que foram necessários para melhorar as suas condições. Como resultado destes estudos, o surgimento da COVID-19 piorou as condições de trabalho e de vida, e ficou demonstrado que é urgente preparar medidas contra doenças infecciosas para pessoas vulneráveis.

Palavras-chave: Turquia, trabalhadores agrícolas sazonais, migração, COVID-19.

1- Introduction

Turkey is the world's 7th largest agricultural producer, and the agricultural sector contributes to more than 10% of the country's total exports and employs approximately 19% of the country's workforce (FAO, 2016; OECD, 2019; Kang, 2022). However, approximately half of the agricultural labor force is estimated to be composed of seasonal migrant workers (Şimşek, 2012; Öz & Bulut, 2013; Çelik, Şimşek, Yüce, Aylin, & Duman, 2015).

In Turkey, the reason for this large increase in seasonal agricultural workers is related to the mechanization of agriculture, the unbalanced distribution of land ownership, neoliberalism, and the increase in cash crop cultivation, due to the expansion of irrigation systems (Kıray, 1999; Aydın, 2002; Öz and Bulut, 2013; Kang, 2022). In general, seasonal agricultural workers from eastern and southeastern Turkey make short-term migrations with their families to agricultural regions in the country during the hoeing and harvesting seasons. The poor working and living conditions of these seasonal agricultural workers are recognized as serious social problems within Turkey. Therefore, the Turkish government has also implemented several projects to improve health, education, transportation, shelter, labor, and social security (Kang, 2022). However, the sudden outbreak of the COVID-19 epidemic adversely affected the working and living conditions of these workers. COVID-19 has been known as the greatest epidemic of modern times since the 1918 influenza epidemic, and the World Health Organization (WHO) declared a Public Health Emergency of International Concern in March 2020 (Lythgoe and Middleton, 2020; Öncü et al., 2021).

In Turkey, the first outbreak of COVID-19 was reported in March 2020, and Turkish authorities implemented epidemic management processes such as movement restrictions, to prevent the spread of the virus (Kasım, 2020; Öncü, Yildirim, Bostancı, & Erdoğan, 2021). After the declaration of the pandemic, the Turkish government, like in most other countries, closed educational facilities and public gathering places, suspended international flights, and required permissions for intercity travel. Public and private sector employees and seasonal agricultural workers aged between 18 and 20 years could be exempted from strict curfews (Kasım, 2020; MEE, 2020). As such, despite the declaration of an international public health emergency, the movement of seasonal workers for agricultural production activities was specifically permitted because it was quite important for Turkey's agricultural economy. The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic has become a very threatening obstacle to those who live a migrant life. Nevertheless, they are forced to continue migrating agricultural labor due to their economic situation. Therefore, this study focused on workers who, despite the COVID-19 pandemic, had to engage in short-term migrant work with their families. To investigate the geographic mobility of seasonal workers during the COVID-19 pandemic,

Chapter 2 examined how far four families of seasonal workers (33 people) had to travel from their residences, the types of work they performed, and the durations of work they engaged in from May to October 2020. Additionally, Chapter 3 assessed their temporary working and living conditions, as well as the countermeasures they implemented against infectious diseases. This study could provide basic data for establishing the necessary measures and policies for their living and working conditions in another upcoming pandemic situation.

1.1 –The study area and methodological considerations

The Southeastern Anatolia region is characterized by significant social and economic disparities among local residents, which results from several factors, such as the unfavorable conditions of a semiarid climate, distinctive social structures centered on tribal groups, and the concentration of land ownership in the hands of a few tribal landowners (İcli, Okten, & Boyacıoğlu, 2012; Kang, 2013; Kang, 2022). For these reasons, approximately 90% of seasonal agricultural workers in Turkey live in the Southeastern Anatolia region, with Şanlıurfa Province having the highest percentage of these workers. Therefore, Şanlıurfa Province was selected as the study area for this research (Figure 1).

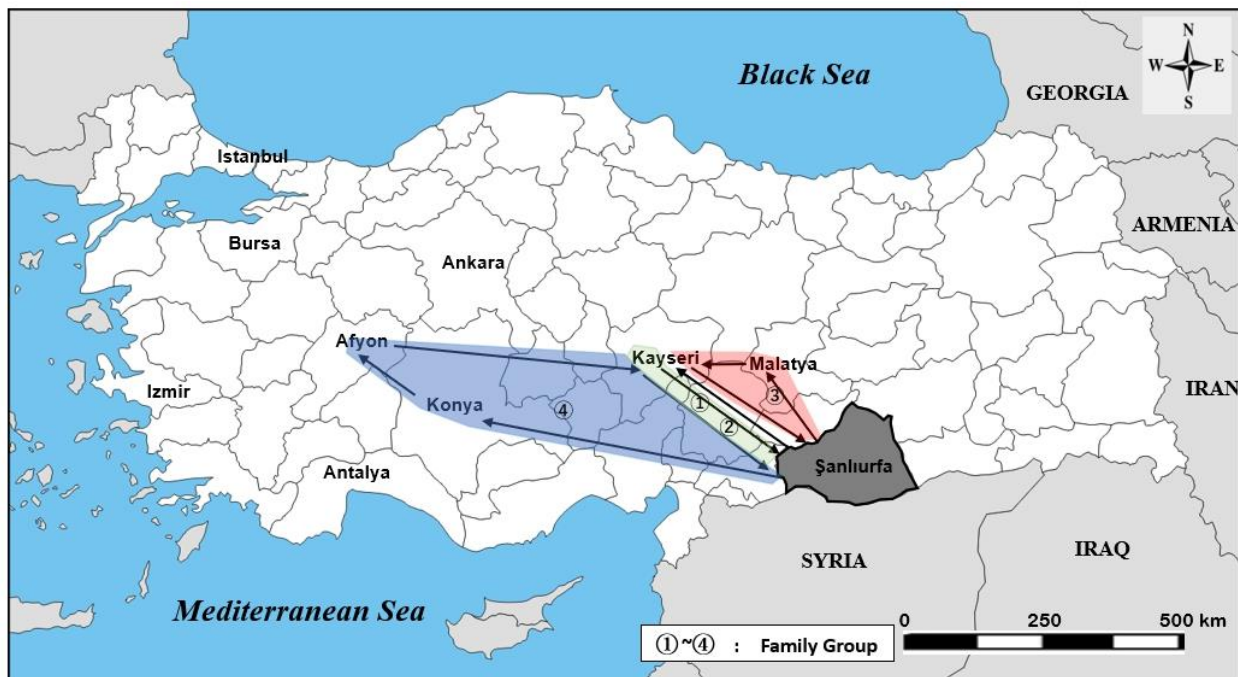


Figure 1. The geographical mobility routes of respondents during the pandemic
Source: Created based on the author's interviews, from May to October 2020.

Most seasonal agricultural workers in the province have no other source of income, and they seasonally migrate with their entire families to earn a living from agricultural work (Kang, 2022). Despite the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, short-term migration for people to maintain their livelihood has been

necessary. Therefore, this study examines the geographical mobility routes of workers and their working and living conditions during the COVID-19 pandemic and provides foundational data for identifying problems faced by workers and preparing countermeasures. As subjects of the study, we selected migrant agricultural workers who were permitted to migrate and engage in seasonal agricultural labor despite the strict mobility restrictions and travel bans implemented by the Turkish government due to the COVID-19 outbreak since March 2020. We conducted interviews with four households (33 people in total) capable of engaging in seasonal agricultural labor during the period from May to October 2020. In terms of gender, there were 19 female workers and 14 male workers (Figure 2).

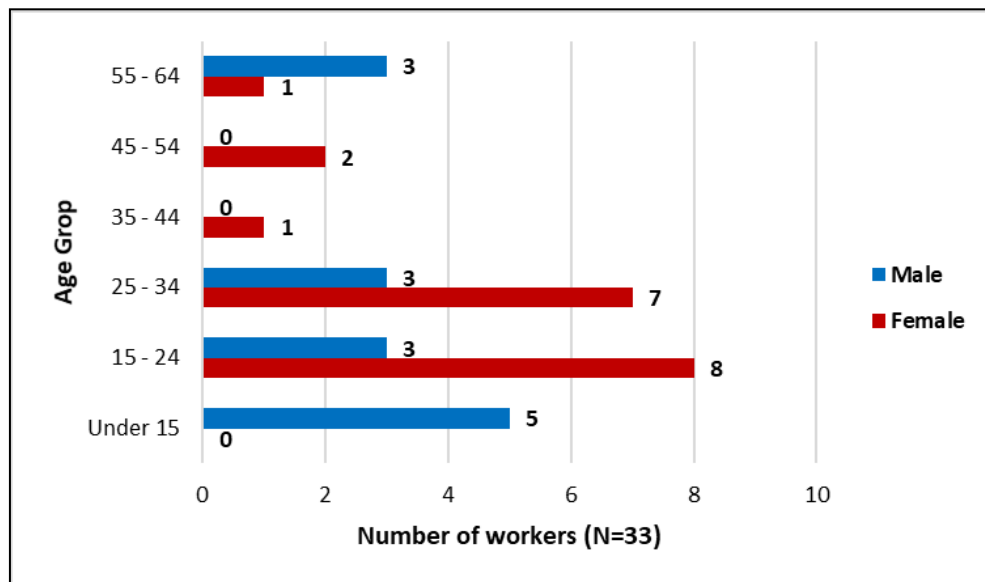


Figure 2. The gender and age groups of the interviewed workers

This study utilized a combination of semi-structured, face-to-face in-depth interviews and telephone interviews with workers. This study was possible during the COVID-19 pandemic because the interviewer who conducted interviews with the seasonal workers was a university-educated female researcher who also participated in seasonal agricultural work with her family. In addition, when the city was under lockdown due to the outbreak of the pandemic, data were collected through telephone interviews with seasonal agricultural workers.

2 - Geographic mobility routes of seasonal workers during the COVID-19 pandemic period

Along with their families, seasonal agricultural workers migrate temporarily and irregularly for an average of five to six months in search of farms requiring their labor force. They connect with employers through intermediaries known as brokers, locally referred to as 'Çavuşlar'. Many workers are hired temporarily, primarily during specific periods such as the weeding and harvesting seasons (Kang, 2022).

Furthermore, due to variations in geographical regions and crop varieties with different harvesting schedules, these workers migrate to other farms in need of temporary labor after completing their work on one farm (Figure 1, Table 1). Their primary source of income is derived from engaging in seasonal agricultural work with their families for five to six months. After completing their work, they return to their settlements in Şanlıurfa Province to live, and when the weeding and harvest season arrives, they move to work and live repeatedly every year. For those who have to engage in economic activities while living in migration, the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic posed significant threats to their livelihoods. At the critical juncture of deciding between migrant labor for sustenance and the cessation of migrant labor as a precaution against the epidemic, they were compelled to make profoundly challenging decisions (Zırh et al., 2020). Ultimately, they had no choice but to continue their migrant labor despite the risk posed by the epidemic. The reason they were able to engage in seasonal migration labor despite the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic is due to the significant role that the labor force of seasonal workers plays in the Turkish agricultural economy. For this reason, their seasonal migration for agricultural labor was exceptionally allowed despite the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdowns (Kasım, 2020; MEE, 2020).

Figure 1 represents a map of the geographical mobility routes taken by four families of seasonal workers who responded to the interviews during the pandemic. These families had relatively limited mobility compared to the period before the pandemic. However, the map shows that they migrated as far as Afyonkarahisar Province, which is approximately 956 kilometers away from Şanlıurfa Province, to engage in seasonal agricultural work.

"We live differently from ordinary people. We reside away from our hometown to earn a living. Whenever a 'Çavuş' finds us works, we migrate like nomads. Especially during the summer, there are numerous agricultural works, so we often migrate in search of work" (male worker, aged 23, August 2020).

"In our region, the semi-feudal system still continues. Since we do not have our own land, we came here. If land reform had been implemented on time, we would have been working on our lands. If that had happened, we would not have faced this terrible situation of having to do migrant work even during the pandemic" (male worker, aged 59, August 2020).

As evidenced by the above interviews, the region inhabited by these workers retains a distinctive tribal social structure, characterized by the centralization of land ownership in the hands of a few tribal landowners (İcli, Okten, & Boyacıoğlu, 2012; Kang, 2013; Kang, 2022). When questioned about the reasons for choosing migrant laborers for their livelihood in this study, approximately 79% of respondents cited insufficient land for sustenance, 16% mentioned a lack of available work opportunities, and 5% stated an inability to find alternative occupations.

Additionally, the Southeastern Anatolia region, where they reside, exhibits notably low rates of primary and secondary education for women within Turkey (Kocabaş, et al., 2014). Vulnerable groups, particularly seasonal agricultural workers, face even lower levels of female education, giving rise to

significant social issues (Kang, 2022). An examination of the educational backgrounds of the female workers in this study revealed that 21% of them had not received formal schooling. However, among them, 42% had completed primary school, 16% had completed middle school, 10.5% had completed high school, and another 10.5% had graduated from university. Nonetheless, despite holding university degrees, some female workers were still engaged in seasonal agricultural labor alongside their families.

“I majored in literature at university. Despite graduating, I am working as a seasonal worker with my family because I do not have enough time and financial resources to prepare for the civil service exam” (female worker, aged 24, August 2020).

Table 1. Basic information on seasonal agriculture work collected by respondents in 2020

Family	Type of work	Province	Period	Number of family members		Number of working-age (15-64) family members	
				Female	Male	Female	Male
1	Sugar beet: hoeing, weeding, watering, etc. Sunflower seed harvesting, Apple harvesting.	Kayseri	May - September (5 months)	6		6	
				4	2	4	2
2	Sugar beet: hoeing, weeding, watering, etc., Sunflower seed harvesting, Apple harvesting.	Kayseri	May-October (6 months)	13		8	
				5	8	4	4
3	Apricot picking.	Malatya	July-October (4 months)	5		5	
	Sunflower seed harvesting, Apple harvesting.	Kayseri		4	1	4	1
4	Sugar beet: hoeing, weeding, watering, etc.	Konya	May-October (6 months)	9		9	
	Poppy seed harvesting.	Afyon		6	3	6	3
	Apple harvesting.	Kayseri					
Total				33		28	
				19	14	18	10

Source: created based on the author's interviews (Şanlıurfa Province, from May to October 2020).

Table 1 provides details on the short-term migration of these four families, including the name of the location, duration of work, type of work, and number of family members who migrated. The second family group on the table migrated despite the pandemic and included not only family members of working age but

also young children aged 2, 3, and 10 years. In these cases, an elder or one of the family members is left in the temporary residence to care for the children while other family members work on the farms. Their main seasonal work involved harvesting sugar beets, sunflower seeds, and apples. Most of the respondents did not want to perform migration work because they were afraid of contracting COVID-19, because their families became sick during migration, or because they were worried about potential accidents due to inadequate transportation when moving to another region. However, they had no alternative and had to continue doing migrant work to earn a livelihood.

3- The working and living conditions of the workers

With the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, the working and living conditions of agricultural migrant workers have worsened. Even before the pandemic, the working and living conditions of seasonal migrant workers were deeply concerning. To address this issue, the METİP (*The Project for the Improvement of the Working and Living Conditions Lives of Seasonal Migratory Agricultural Workers; Mevsimlik Gezici Tarım İşçilerinin Çalışma ve Sosyal Hayatlarının iyileştirilmesi projesi*) of the Turkish government and numerous research studies were conducted (Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, 2012; Öz & Bulut, 2013; Gökmen & Egemen, 2021; Mertol et al., 2021; Kang, 2022; Reşit Sevinç & Davran, 2022). The temporary residences of these migrant workers can generally be divided into two types. The first type is temporary residences with electricity and water facilities supported by local governments and the METİP. The second type is a field near a private farm without any such facilities. All the respondents in the study lived in the second type of temporary residence. Therefore, they set up tents on the outskirts of towns or in a field near farms, where the entire family lives together for four to six months. Figure 3 shows their makeshift toilet, bathing, and cooking environment.

As shown in Figure 3, despite the COVID-19 pandemic, they constructed makeshift tents themselves to live in and set up temporary toilets and bathing facilities. They lived in tents erected not in places with established water supply and drainage facilities but on the outskirts of villages or in fields near farms. Consequently, they encountered difficulties accessing clean water and faced significant environmental contamination from toilet waste.

"We use hand pumps for water in our temporary residence. However, water is often muddy due to the presence of sediment. Additionally, because our temporary toilet is made of plastic fabric, it emits unpleasant odors and attracts many insects. Some people have gotten sick from insect bites. There are also neighbors in our temporary residences who have contracted COVID-19. Therefore, I'm taking precautions in my own way. For example, since the hand pump is shared by all the workers, I cover the pump handle with vinyl. When working on the farm, I also cover my mouth with a scarf" (female worker, aged 23, October 2020).

Furthermore, since there was no electricity supply in the temporary residential areas, they stated that the only electricity available to them was from personal portable solar panels or portable lamps that they carried.



Figure. 3. Temporary living conditions of seasonal agricultural workers
Source: Author, Kayseri Province, October 2020.

"We have no electricity, so we cannot watch television. We use portable solar panels for electricity, but we can only use that electricity to charge our mobile phones and light our makeshift tents in the evening. Therefore, we have difficulty getting information about the pandemic" (female worker, aged 23, October 2020).

They faced extremely challenging conditions during the COVID-19 pandemic period regarding access to basic necessities such as water and electricity. Moreover, due to the presence of the infectious disease, interactions with farm owners and nearby residents were limited, preventing them from receiving assistance. As a result, they stated that their living conditions deteriorated further.

As a countermeasure against the COVID-19 pandemic, the workers responded that they installed tents for temporary residences as far away from town as possible and widened the installation interval between tents (Figure 4).

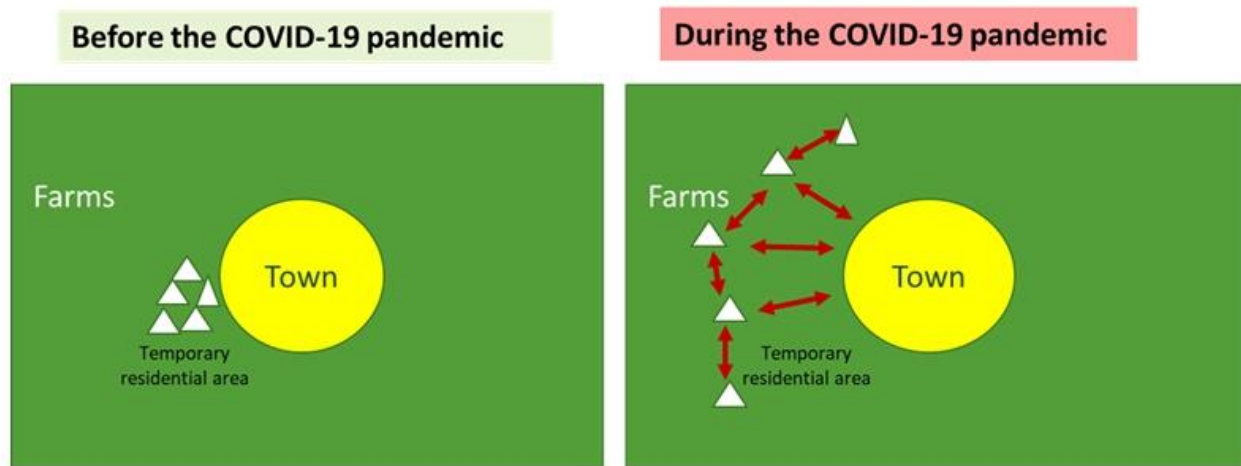


Figure 4. Changes in temporary residence due to the COVID-19 Pandemic
Source: created based on the author's interviews.

However, most workers wore scarves instead of masks. First, they responded that wearing a mask and working in the fields all day was excessively hot and made breathing difficult. Second, they mentioned the economic burden of continuously buying new masks. Therefore, they chose scarves, which they could use repeatedly and which provided relatively comfortable breathing. Additionally, they stated that they made efforts to maintain distance from other workers during agricultural labor. However, they noted that during agricultural work, since an entire family lives together in a single tent, it is practically impossible to implement social distancing within the family. They stated that even if one family member contracts COVID-19, social distancing within the family is not feasible.

"I was picking apples with our families and other workers. Then, people from outside came to collect the apples we had harvested, and I contracted the coronavirus from them. At first, I had headaches, abdominal pain, and fever, so I stopped working and stayed in our tent. I was scared to go to the hospital. After a few days of resting, I started feeling better, but when I was sick, I could not stay away from my family because we only had one tent for my family, and we all had to live in it" (female worker, aged 24, October 2020).

"We go out to the fields in the morning and work until 6 p.m. While we are working, we are so busy that we forget that there is an epidemic. It is impossible to take precautions while working. We're struggling with poverty, and the pandemic has made our work even harder" (female worker, aged 45, October 2020).

Furthermore, despite the COVID-19 pandemic, the economic situation of migrant workers, who must rely on migrant work for their livelihoods, has left them with a sense of relative deprivation. Furthermore, the nature of their work, which requires them to move from region to region, has led to social perceptions of them as carriers of infectious diseases, causing them psychological distress.

4 – Conclusion

In Turkey's agricultural economy, seasonal agricultural workers play a crucial role as a labor force. However, their poor living and working conditions have created numerous social issues. Both governmental and nongovernmental organizations are making significant efforts to improve their living and working conditions, however, substantial progress has yet to be made. Due to the large, irregular, and complex scale and mobility of seasonal migrant workers, reconstructing their living and working environments is a difficult issue. The COVID-19 pandemic emerged in the midst of these difficult circumstances, and the world was scrambling to find ways to prevent and respond to the pandemic.

This study was conducted during a period of stringent mobility restrictions imposed by the widespread outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, there is a limitation in that the number of interview samples was small because the subjects of the study were four migrant worker families (33 people) who were available for interviews. However, to overcome this limitation, in-depth interviews were conducted.

Seasonal workers continued to migrate and engage in seasonal agricultural work during the COVID-19 pandemic, just as they did before. The pandemic left migrant workers who depend on migrant labor for their livelihoods, in a socially and economically more vulnerable and precarious state, unprotected. Their already poor working and living conditions have worsened, and their lack of information on infectious diseases, along with insufficient countermeasures, has emerged as an issue to be addressed. During the pandemic, workers in the study area wore scarves instead of masks, and in the case of male workers, they did not do anything to protect their respiratory system. They responded that wearing masks while working in the hot summer was almost impossible. Additionally, their social distancing measures were not implemented at all, and even when one family member contracted the COVID-19 infection, the entire family had to live together in a single temporary tent. Even finding clean water for daily use was challenging for them. Seasonal workers complained of not only hard physical work, but also psychological difficulties. Even during the pandemic, the economic situation of workers who had to work as seasonal migrants for their livelihoods created a sense of relative deprivation among them. Furthermore, societal perceptions that viewed them as potential carriers of the infectious disease also caused significant psychological distress for them. These circumstances have continued beyond the pandemic period since 2020, and even at present, the work and living environments of these migrant workers have not undergone significant changes.

Basic living conditions should be provided for seasonal agricultural workers who move with their families to various regions for their livelihoods. To achieve this goal, collaborative efforts are needed not only at the government level but also involving farm owners, local authorities, and seasonal agricultural workers. This will establish an efficient system for improving current employment and living conditions, which differ from the current situation. Furthermore, in the context of the pandemic, it is essential to examine the risks faced by socially and economically vulnerable populations from the perspective of workers and to make efforts to develop solutions to address these difficulties. While all classes around the world are suffering from the emergence of infectious diseases that have not been experienced in the current generation, it is

urgent to develop more proactive measures to address infectious diseases for those who are socially and economically vulnerable.

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