

The Özyeğin Foundations: Creating Opportunities For Women And Girls In Turkey

MAIN LESSONS

- Take a holistic approach by looking across the lifecycle of a woman
- Engage the whole community to sustain mindset changes
- Work with partners to build robust and sustainable programs



“In our vision for a strong economy and equitable society, we are committed to projects empowering women in all aspects of their lives and increasing their role in the local and global economy.”

– Hüsnü M. Özyeğin
Board President



Even though women in Turkey have great potential to contribute to their nation’s economic growth and well-being, few are active in the working arena. In 2008, less than 22 percent of Turkish women were in the labor force, compared to an average of 62 percent in OECD countries and an average of 33 percent in countries with similar levels of economic development. One big reason why women’s economic potential remains underutilized is their lack of education. Ayşen and Hüsnü M. Özyeğin, the founder of one of the largest financial services holding firms in Turkey, recognized this problem two decades ago, and they decided to do something about it.

Through several foundations, Ayşen and Hüsnü have devoted significant resources to creating opportunities for women and girls. Using access to education as the cornerstone, they have created opportunities along the complete “educational lifetime” of a woman – starting with early childhood and extending through post-secondary education. Their organizations, such as the Mother Child Education Foundation and the Özyeğin Foundation, provide millions of euros each year to improve the lives of Turkish women and girls. In the process, all of Turkey is benefiting.

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WIN-WIN SITUATION FOR BUSINESS AND FOR WOMEN

- 27 dormitories provide over 5,000 girls the opportunity to attend secondary school throughout Turkey
- Over 550,000 people have participated in face-to-face educational programs operated by the Mother Child Education Foundation
- Rate of preschool enrollment has increased by 107% in Turkey since the inception of the “7 is Too Late” campaign (facilitated by the Mother Child Education Foundation)

Creating Opportunities for Women in Turkey

Hüsnü M. Özyeğin, the Chairman of the Board of Fiba Group, has always made giving back to society a core component



of his professional career. He launched the Fiba Group in 1987. Since then, it has grown into a financial services leader, employing more than 10,000 staff in 15 countries with total assets of more than US\$20 billion.

Hüsnü launched the Finans Foundation in 1990 (later renamed the Özyeğin Foundation) with the belief that “supporting future generations is an investment in Turkey’s future.” Over time, their engagement increased.

In 1993, they founded the Mother Child Education Foundation with a focus on early childhood and adult education. In 2005, Hüsnü supported the establishment of Özyeğin University in Istanbul, which opened its doors to its first class of students in September 2008.

A consistent thread through all of this engagement has been the importance of creating opportunities for women and girls in Turkey.

Improving Access to Education

Ayşen and Hüsnü’s philanthropy is underpinned by a serious belief in the importance of education. As Hüsnü recounted to a journalist in 2007: “The most important problem that Turkey has is education.” Even though women’s education levels have been rising in the past two decades, the country has a persistent gap in the primary education enrollment rate between girls and boys. Only 88% of girls are enrolled in primary education, compared with 92% of boys, according to 2007 statistics from the Ministry of National Education. This gap grows over time as children age, due to cultural and economic biases that can prevent girls from continuing their studies.

Hüsnü’s goals are ambitious. The organizations that he supports target every stage of the education “life cycle” – from early childhood education through post-secondary education at the Özyeğin University. Hüsnü has said, “I want Turkey to have the same education levels as Europe 25 years from now.”

Though some of these initiatives focus on

both genders, others have a strong and almost exclusive focus on women. The Mother Child Education Foundation (known by its Turkish acronym, AÇEV) provides early childhood education programs by engaging mothers in their children’s education. In one of the organization’s core programs, mothers of preschool-aged children attend a weekly training program over six months that provides tactical methods to support the holistic development of their children. As a result, mothers become empowered with the skills and attitudes that will have a positive effect on them and their children. “I believe that our most important responsibility is to provide a more equal start to life. The earliest years are the most formative for an individual and that is why we have invested most at AÇEV in different forms of early childhood programs throughout Turkey,” Ayşen explains.

In Turkey, many girls must leave their communities to attend secondary school. One intervention that has been shown

to increase secondary school attendance is to provide dedicated housing to girls. Towards that end, the Özyeğin Foundation has completed 27 dormitories throughout Turkey since 2005 that have provided about 5,000 girls per year with quality housing and access to secondary education. These dormitories are built in close coordination with the government, in the country’s poorest regions. During a field visit to one such dorm in Diyarbakır in southeastern Turkey, teenage girls in school uniforms milled around the halls and then gathered for lunch in the clean, well stocked cafeteria. “I am very happy to be here. I want to be a lawyer one day,” said one girl while eating a watermelon. She came from a poor household and was the first girl in her family to attend secondary school. It was not that difficult for her parents to send her away, she explained, because both her housing and her meals were paid for.



Another program that the Özyeğin Foundation supports is direct scholarships for higher education in Turkey and abroad. A sizeable percentage of the scholarships are provided to women. Scholarship recipients are eligible to receive a range of support services – including internships and permanent positions with Hüsnu’s private enterprises.

In September 2008, the Özyeğin University opened its doors to its inaugural class of students. The university admits young men and women with the aspiration that graduates will be among the most “sought-after individuals in society.” The University has ambitious plans to support budding

women entrepreneurs. In late 2009, Hüsnu announced a new partnership with the Goldman Sachs 10,000 Women program. The 10,000 Women initiative aims to enhance women’s entrepreneurial and managerial skills in developing countries and support economic development by reducing gender inequality. Implemented in 16 countries since 2008, the project plans to reach 10,000 women worldwide within the next five years. “We will try and help Turkish women entrepreneurs acquire qualifications and emerge in the business world with Goldman Sachs within the framework of the 10,000 Women project,” said Hüsnu at the

press announcement for the partnership. The initiative is being implemented through the Entrepreneurship Centre of Özyeğin University over a three-year period. The plan is to provide 150 hours of training to 100 women in the first year alone, and to eventually reach a total of 340 women.



Focusing on Women and their Children

AÇEV was inspired by research completed in the 1980s about the status of preschool-aged children by Prof. Dr. Sevda Bekman, Prof. Dr. Çiğdem Kağıtçıbaşı and Prof. Dr. Diane Sunar of Boğaziçi University. The work revealed significant gaps in the education that preschool-aged children received in Turkey.



Today, AÇEV’s programs are implemented in numerous cities across Turkey to “empower and improve the quality of life” by focusing on its two primary areas of expertise: early childhood and adult education. The programs are delivered in face-to-face sessions or via educational programs on television. To

expand its reach, the organization also develops materials for the internet.

AÇEV supports a range of programs to engage women and their children so that the mothers take an active role in their children’s development. Different programs are targeted to mothers of children of different ages. These women develop skills to better work with their preschool-aged children.

One such program, the Mother Child Education Program is a home-based, preschool and parent education program that targets socio-economically disadvantaged mothers of six year olds. This program equips mothers with parenting skills and

ensures that they are aware of the tools to support their children’s cognitive abilities.

CHANGING HEARTS AND MINDS

Ayşen and Hüsnu recognize the importance of impacting public policy

to achieve long-term social impact and have embarked on highly visible national campaigns. “Given the size of population in Turkey and limited resources, we decided to start working at the policy level too, conducting a media campaign and research,” explains Ayla Göksel, the CEO of AÇEV.

In cooperation with six other NGOs, AÇEV has supported the “7 is Too Late” campaign. Targeted at changing public policy around early childhood education, the campaign has developed recommendations aimed at increasing the number of children under the age of six that receive early childhood education. The campaign’s name refers to the fact that in Turkey, the preschool enrollment for four to six year olds has hovered in the 20 to 25% range. The campaign’s focus is to lower the official age at which children need to start school and to make at least one year of preschool universally available.

Sevil Gümüş, an expert in Early Child Education in Turkey, says: “Because the

child's cognitive, social, physical and emotional development takes place in the first six years, deficiency of education in these years cannot be treated later; it is almost impossible." And these early investments have longer-term payoffs. There is a return rate of seven Turkish lira for every one Turkish lira invested in early childhood education. Beyond these societal benefits, children who start school earlier tend to stay in school longer and perform better. Their educational TV programs have been

a particular source of pride for AÇEV. "We developed a 60-episode program to teach literacy in the format of a daytime TV show for women with singing, dancing and stars. The program was watched by four million viewers per day. We found that women who watched the program gained basic literacy skills, and recently a group from Pakistan expressed interest in replicating this in their country," says Ayla.



Global Impact

Just as Hüsnu's private enterprises have been extremely successful, so have his and Ayşen's efforts to have a lasting impact on Turkish society. The programs they support have led to impressive returns for women and girls:

- For example, through AÇEV's portfolio of programs, nearly 6,500 trainers have provided over 550,000 people with long-term, face-to-face educational programs. AÇEV has reached over 6 million viewers through television programs aimed at

children, families, and women. An estimated 30 million people have been reached by the foundation's publications, research, and mass-media advocacy activities. AÇEV has begun to transfer know-how to other countries and its programs are now implemented in nine countries across Europe and the Middle East.

- The "7 is Too Late" campaign has also had impressive results. Since its start, the rate of preschool enrollment in the

targeted age group has increased by 107 percent. Government policy has initiated universal preschool education in Turkey beginning with 32 provinces in 2009.

- The Özyeğin Foundation provides access to schooling for 25,000 students through schools and 5,000 girls through secondary school girls' dormitories each year. The Foundation has awarded 10,000 scholarships to date.

COMMITMENT TO EDUCATION IN ACTION: THE MOTHER CHILD CENTER IN DIYARBAKIR



Situated on the banks of the river Tigris in southeastern Turkey, Diyarbakir is a historic town where women's roles have remained largely traditional. AÇEV has been mindful of the region's particular circumstances, and its activities there have focused on educating women and children. The AÇEV Alipaşa Center, a mother-child education facility in Diyarbakir, exemplifies these

efforts. Since its opening in 2003, the center has trained 105 women and 105 children each year. Focusing on the mother and her child, the program allows mothers to receive lessons while their children are playing in the colorful playroom or the center's gorgeous garden.

Given women's low education levels, their training materials are mostly pictures. "Once a week, mothers come together in a room at the center and learn about healthy child rearing, nutrition, how to protect their children from accidents, and how to best prepare them for school. Fathers can also take part in the Father Support Program," explains Hediye, a trainer. Mothers are recommended activities to do with their children at home.

At a group gathering of program graduates, the women seem very grateful for what they've learned. "Before the program, the children were not listening to me, and I was not listening to them. I used to beat them when they didn't listen. Now our dialogue is much better," says Birja Mircan, a program graduate. The women have found that their husbands are becoming more respectful, too. "We are just sad that our other children, the older ones, are not that lucky and couldn't benefit from what we learned earlier," says Sabiha, another training recipient.

Lessons Learned

TAKE A HOLISTIC APPROACH BY LOOKING ACROSS THE LIFE CYCLE OF A WOMAN

Recognizing that there are opportunities to empower women at each stage of their life cycle, the programs that Ayşen and Hüsnü support try to be comprehensive in providing educational opportunities to women and girls of all ages and at different stages of their lives. A range of programs build the skills of mothers to support their children's development, with differentiated modules for mothers of children in different age groups. For instance, for women aged 15 and older who may not have had formal education, the Functional Adult Literacy and Women's Support Program focuses on functional literacy skills, along with targeted activities that help women participate more actively in the social and political spheres. In a country where adult illiteracy rates are high, such an approach has allowed them to reach and impact a larger share of women in need of education than they would have by focusing just on younger girls.

ENGAGE THE WHOLE COMMUNITY TO SUSTAIN MINDSET CHANGES

The bulk of AÇEV's portfolio of programs targets mothers. However, given the importance of providing fathers with an equal

set of skills as mothers, the organization offers the Father Support Program (FSP). The program targets literate fathers of children, aged 3-11, with the objective of increasing the level of involvement of the fathers in their children's development. The communities where it has been implemented have hailed it as a success, with mothers noting their husbands' more positive attitudes towards their children and a better understanding of their wives' burdens, explains Aslı Silahdaroğlu, a staff member at the Özyeğin Foundation.

WORK WITH PARTNERS TO BUILD ROBUST AND SUSTAINABLE PROGRAMS

AÇEV partners closely with a range of national partners, such as the Turkish Ministries of National Education and Health. It also works with a range of international partner organizations, including the United Nations agencies and the World Bank. Finally, it engages with local NGOs and local community organizations when planning interventions in communities throughout Turkey. Such relationships allow the organization to leverage its skills and expertise. These partnerships are also proving useful as the foundations work to expand their programs to other countries, such as Pakistan and Afghanistan.

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