



Education in Poverty: Portraits from Turkey

February 2024



“The States Parties to the present Covenant recognize the right of everyone to education. They agree that education shall be directed to the full development of the human personality and the sense of its dignity and shall strengthen the respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms.”

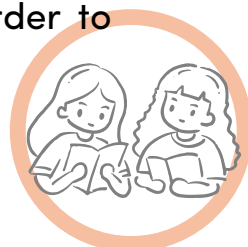
From Article 13-1 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights

Introduction:

Twenty million students in Turkey, including approximately five and a half million in primary schools, resumed the second term on February 5th, 2024. Education continues to play a critical role in breaking the cycle of poverty in Turkey (1). Unfortunately, attendance in education in Turkey means struggling with significant challenges for many students and families. One in five children are skipping meals (2), three in five have never been to a cinema or a theater in the last year (3), 442,643 children are out of education (4), and income distribution continues to deteriorate (5).

As the Deep Poverty Network (DPN), through fieldwork and household interviews conducted in diversified neighborhoods of Istanbul, we reveal the multidimensional nature of poverty, generate discussion, and create an agenda. We engage in advocacy activities with public institutions, local and central governments by presenting solutions based on current discussions. As an outcome of the fieldwork, empowerment efforts continue to support primary school girls who are at risk of dropping out of education, under the title of “access to education support.” This support includes providing uniforms, stationery, and monthly basic food supply to prioritize these girls’ needs. Household support, including rent, bills, medicine, and household items, as well as referral efforts for social support and employment mechanisms also continue as part of our program.

In this report, we examine how difficulties encountered in basic needs such as nutrition, transportation, clothing, and access to all kinds of school supplies affect female students’ education through interviews we conducted with the parents of nine students we support. The report summarizes the challenges they have overcome or still face in order to ensure their full participation in education.



The ages and education levels of the students whose parents we interviewed are as follows:

Nihan: 14 years old, 8th grade student

İpek: 15 years old, 10th grade student

Helin: 8 years old, 3rd grade student

Simge: 8 years old, 1st grade student

Melahat: 19 years old, 2nd year university student

Cansu: 12 years old, 7th grade student

Ayça: 17 years old, 12th grade student

Seher: 12 years old, 7th grade student

Ceren: 14 years old, 9th grade student

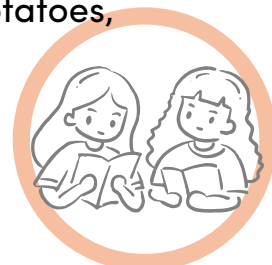
*The names of the children have been changed to protect their privacy.

Nutrition in School

Almost all the families we interviewed have serious problems in providing regular and healthy nutrition to their school-aged children. While some of them have very limited budget to shop in school cafeterias, others have none. Therefore, they are left with meals they bring from home. Most of these meals are mainly sandwiches which are high-carbohydrate meals with quite low nutritional value.

Nihan, 14 years- old 8th grade student, tells her mother that she has grown up and does not want to eat like "first graders." She receives a maximum of 30-35 TL as pocket money per day. With this allowance, she mainly buys simit (Turkish bagel), ayran (a yogurt-based drink), biscuits and water. According to her mother, Nihan "barely manages until she gets home" during school hours (from 7:50 am to 1:30 pm). Once, she was able to buy a hamburger for 65 TL by saving some of her pocket money throughout the week. Her mother says that Nihan is embarrassed and ashamed of not being able to spend money while with her friends; and as a result, she no longer wants to attend school.

Although there are hardships, Helin's mother says that she regularly tries to prepare her daughter's lunchbox, who attends the 3rd grade of primary school. Sometimes she sends sarma (stuffed grape leaves) and rice with chicken to school. One of Helin's favorite meals is a sandwich with potatoes,



"The States Parties to the present Covenant recognize the right of everyone to an adequate standard of living for himself and his family, including adequate food, clothing and housing, and to the continuous improvement of living conditions. The States Parties will take appropriate steps to ensure the realization of this right, recognizing to this effect the essential importance of international co-operation based on free consent."

International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, Article 11-1

cucumbers, and olives. But she also often takes cakes, biscuits, and chocolate from home. At times, she tells her mother that she is tired of these same snacks.

Simge's school gives her a nutrition list because she is in the first grade of primary school, but her mother says that she cannot follow it due to financial restrictions. Her mother puts whatever she can find in her lunchbox such as milk, bread, potato fries, pasta, or breakfast items. Thanks to the grocery card support provided by DPN, they can buy milk, yogurt, eggs, oil, and dry food. Since her family has no money, Simge doesn't receive any allowance. Simge's family think that health problems they face at home might be due to the tap water they have to drink since they don't have access to clean bottled water.

Melahat, a second-year university student, brings her food from home almost every day, even though she is on campus all day. Her mother says that the most common food in her diet is rice and that she buys soup from the school cafeteria once a week.

Cansu, a 7th grade student, also faces challenging nutritional conditions. Her mother says that her daughter hardly ever goes to the school cafeteria. She can only occasionally buy lollipops from there. Cansu's mother sadly conveys that Cansu sometimes says things like "my friend bought a chubby hamburger," and adds, "I swear, neither of my two children has ever bought a hamburger or a toast. Sometimes I put lettuce or a tomato in the bread if I can find it. Sometimes we cannot even buy fruit juice. I can at least buy their nutrition with your help. A simit costs around 10 to 15 TL, and fruit juice is 10 TL."



Ayça, who is a senior high school student does not go to the school cafeteria because "prices are twice as expensive than the supermarket prices." Her mother explains that the price of ayran varies by 2-3 liras at the school cafeteria. With the support of DPN's supermarket card, she prepares Ayça's meals with the food she buys from the supermarket. Her mother says that Ayça's most common meal is potato sandwich and ayran.

Ceren, a ninth-grade student at a well-known public school does not tell her father about her need for healthy meals because she is an introvert. Since she does not like to have breakfast, she only receives pocket money for lunch from her father. At noon, she goes to a rice stall 8-9 minutes away from her school because its affordable.

School Transport

Most of the younger students are walked to and from school in the neighborhood by their parents. This is a major problem for parents who have to work. When children get older, conditions can become even more difficult. Some of them cannot get the discounted student card despite all their efforts. In some cases, they have to go long distances on foot. Some students try to save money by taking public transport to school and return home on foot. As a result of this struggle children come home tired and a noticeable drop in performance is observed. With two subway stops between her home and the school Nihan cannot use the subway. The last time Nihan's family took the subway, a ride was 12.5 TL. It takes her a long time to get to school. Nihan's mother told her that she had tried hard to get a student card, but she could not succeed, and finally Nihan told her, "I hope for it, and I waited but it doesn't work. Never mind, you are already tired of walking to the hospital all the time," and they gave up on their efforts.

Cansu has to walk 45 minutes to school every day because her mother cannot afford the 250 TL monthly student card fee. Her mother is rarely able to accompany Cansu to school because she has arthritis in her knee



and is diabetic. Cansu told her mother that she doesn't feel like studying anymore because she is tired." Cansu had a traffic accident on December 6th last year. Her uniform, coat and boots were damaged after being hit by a motorcycle. Cansu's mother sadly told us that Cansu showed her boots with the soles collapsed, saying "I'm so embarrassed, one of my toes is sticking out "Her mother gave Cansu her own cardigan.

Concerns and Expectations about Children's Education

All parents are aware that education is very important despite all the challenges. When asked about their concerns about whether their children will continue school, two trends stand out. Some say that they will continue their children's education with determination no matter what, while others talk about financial concerns and the possibility of their children's loss of motivation. Clothing and electronics stand out as the most serious needs of children. Here, too, it is noteworthy that the school administration and neighbors help when necessary. Nevertheless, we observe that both the families and the children have dreams about their future professions and especially children want to work in the health sector –dream of becoming a doctor, nurse, or physiotherapist – or take part in the public service as a police officer or a prosecutor.

Nihan's mother, who said that Nihan was thinking of dropping out of school because she couldn't spend money with her friends, doesn't want to be too hard on her daughter and thinks that her daughter is right. Nevertheless, when Nihan said that she wanted to work in a textile atelier her mother did not let her do so as she was afraid that she would drop out of school. Nihan had previously dreamed of becoming a nurse. "I hope she can be a doctor, so he doesn't have to go through what I went through," says her mother, and adds "But it looks like she'll have trouble even becoming a nurse." Nihan studies in the room she shares with her siblings. While studying, she uses the Wi-Fi her neighbor has given her the password, and she gets help with her homework from the same neighbor's daughter. Since Nihan has only one school uniform, her teachers allow her to come to school with her own clothes two days a week giving them time to wash the uniform. The family was previously able to shop for clothes with a code provided by a clothing brand, but now they are facing problems in providing clothing.



İpek and Helin, whose parents we interviewed, also want to become doctors. İpek has an internet connection at home that they pay for jointly with their neighbors, while Helin has a line that only they use. Both children can access the internet from their parents' phones. Helin's mother enthusiastically explains that her daughter has not yet chosen a major, but she desires to become a pediatrician because of her love for children. With the code provided by a clothing company mediated by DPN, they met their needs for boots, sweaters, tracksuits, and coats.

Her mother says that Melahat is a young person who loves school and puts "a lot of effort" to become a physiotherapist and she is preparing for the exams again to get a four-year degree. She says that because of her willingness, she is not worried about her dropping out of school. Her mother says Melahat has been able to wear her (her mother's) clothes for four years without demanding new ones. . She uses the computer provided by the DPN in a room she shares with her siblings.

Simge, on the other hand, uses her mother's phone and the neighbor's internet line, which sometimes have connection problems. She wants to be a kindergarten teacher, probably because she is a first grader and sees the teachers as role models. Her mother says that she trusts her daughter, who has learned to read and write in the first semester and reads as many books as she can. She says that "she will send her to school as long as God gives her the opportunity." Simge still needs shoes and bags.

We mentioned the great difficulties Cansu has in terms of nutrition, transportation and clothing and her mother shares her concerns with us, saying that "Cansu wants to become a prosecutor. They are children, they cannot think thoroughly but I am on tenterhooks all the time for Cansu and her siblings."

Ceren, who was congratulated by the district education director when she won a well-known public school in her neighborhood, can only access the internet from her father's phone at home. Ceren, who wants to become a prosecutor, thought about transferring to another school in the neighborhood due to both financial impossibilities and adaptation



problems, but was convinced to stay at her current school by the district education director. Around this time, Ceren and her sister Seher, who wanted to be a sportswoman first and then a policewoman, would often tell their father that they envy their friends working at the cafés and that they should also work part-time to earn pocket money, since their husbands wouldn't let them work in the future. But their father told us that he did not allow them to work: "I started working in the fourth grade. If they start earning money now, they will lose their enthusiasm for pursuing their studies."

Ayça, who works as a cleaner in textile production and earns pocket money during the summer vacation, wants to continue school and become a police officer. But her mother is worried that she will not be able to continue her studies.

Holiday and Leisure Time

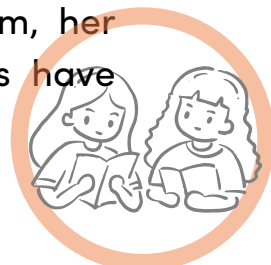
"States Parties recognize the right of the child to rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to the age of the child and to participate freely in cultural life and the arts.

States Parties shall respect and promote the right of the child to participate fully in cultural and artistic life and shall encourage the provision of appropriate and equal opportunities for cultural, artistic, recreational and leisure activity."

Convention on the Rights of the Child, Article 31

We asked the families we interviewed about their children's leisure time activities and how they spent their time during the semester break and also how they wanted to spend it. Unfortunately, the responses indicate that children do not have many opportunities to spend quality time during their leisure hours, and, moreover, through social media and peer group communication, they often witness others' winter vacations and activities that they cannot join and feel sorry for themselves.

Nihan visited her aunt and stayed there for a few days to spend time with her cousin who is at the same age as her. Her mother says, "Since there are not many chances to go out, she started helping with household chores at home, but she also loves reading books, and we bought her some books to read during the holidays." For her holiday dream, her mother says that Nihan mentions about Sapanca where houses have pools; "She really wants that."



Helin finished her semester homework on the first day of the holiday, saying "I want to have peace of mind for the rest of the holiday." Then she played at home and in the parks with her cousins. Helin, who can only go outside the neighborhood for the Mardin festival said to her mother, "Mom, you never took us out during the holidays."

Simge, who stayed at home during the holiday, watches whatever comes on ATV, according to her mother. But her mother does not allow her to watch too much television. If she finishes her homework, her mother gives her phone to Simge to play. At home, Simge played with her dolls and teddy bears during the holiday. Her mother says that there is no park close to where they live and there is one further away, but she is afraid to take the children there because "gangs fight there." Simge wants to go to indoor play areas the most. But to enter these playgrounds, you have to pay 140 TL per child. Her mother, who earns 300 TL a day asks, "How will I manage if I give this money?"

Cansu could only go out of the house in the evening to buy bread and pastries from the bakery during the semester break. She reads books and plays with her brother at home and gradually started to help with the household chores like picking up her toys and washing her dishes. After seeing her friends skiing in her WhatsApp stories, Cansu and her siblings said, "Mom, we didn't see snow this year. There's this place called Kayaktepe. Is the road fare too expensive?" Their mother says, "I said it's far. I said we'll get lost. I said we can't go without a man." They wanted to go to the beach, which is a 15–20-minute drive away, but they couldn't. Her mother also mentions about the school shows that range from 80 to 120 TL and adds that her daughter cannot attend those and thus "stays alone in the classroom." She also says that she is 32 years old and has never been to a cinema in her life, and that they are very curious about the cinema as well.

Another pair curious about the snow holiday is Ceren and her sister Seher. Their father said that the sisters, who follow skiing stories of their friends in Uludağ, only managed to go to a cafe with their friends, stayed mostly at home and finished their homework three or four days before the start of the school.



Results

Supporting successful students who continue their education under conditions of poverty and enabling them to reveal their potential while facing various challenges depends on adhering to several international agreements we mention in this report and that our country is among the signatory countries. In order to adhere to these agreements, we request the following concrete actions from relevant policy makers:

To improve nutrition opportunities at schools:

- A budget allocation should be made for children and young people to provide access to healthy meals at schools.
- Collaborations involving local producers should be encouraged.
- Nutrition support programs for low-income families should be expanded and effectively implemented.
- While developing these programs Turkey should become a member of the International Food Coalition, where countries with similar challenges share their experiences.

To provide ease of access to school for students:

- Student public transport cards should be free of charge. Reliable and regular shuttle services should be provided to facilitate access to schools in remote areas.
- Solutions should be found to eliminate the bureaucratic difficulties in students obtaining public transport cards.

To reduce concerns about school attendance:

- Measures to reduce educational expenses -for textbooks, stationery, and school fees- should be widely implemented in all classes.
- Economic support programs for financially struggling families should be strengthened and expanded to a wider scope.



To enhance students' social capabilities in their leisure time:

- To enhance students' social capabilities in their leisure time:
- An infrastructure should be prepared where children can be offered free or low-cost sports, art, and cultural activities through cooperation between schools, central government, and municipalities.
- Campaigns and activities should be organized for children of low-income families during semester breaks.

Solidarity Keeps Us Alive!



Kaynaklar:

(1) TÜİK'in "Yoksulluk ve Yaşam Koşulları İstatistikleri, 2023" araştırmasına göre "okur-yazar olmayan fertlerin %27,8'i, bir okul bitirmeyenlerin %24,7'si, lise altı eğitilmişlerin %14,0'ı, lise ve dengi okul mezunlarının ise %7,7'si" yoksul olarak hesaplanmış, yükseköğretim mezunları ise %3,2 ile en düşük yoksulluk oranına sahip grup olmuştur.

<https://data.tuik.gov.tr/Bulten/Index?p=Yoksulluk-ve-Yasam-Kosullari-Istatistikleri-2023-53713&dil=1>

(2) Euronews: PISA raporunda yoksulluk ile başarı ilişkisi: Öğün kaçırma oranı arttıkça matematik puanı da düşüyor.

<https://tr.euronews.com/2023/12/21/pisa-raporunda-yoksulluk-ile-basari-iliskisi-ogun-kacirma-orani-arttikca-matematik-puanı-d>

(3) TÜİK, Türkiye Çocuk Araştırması, 2022

<https://data.tuik.gov.tr/Bulten/Index?p=Turkiye-Cocuk-Arastirmasi-2022-49744>

(4) ERG Eğitim İzleme Raporu, 2023

<https://www.egitimreformugirisimi.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/EgitimIzlemeRaporu2023.pdf>

(5) TÜİK, Gelir Dağılımı İstatistikleri, 2023

<https://data.tuik.gov.tr/Bulten/Index?p=Gelir-Dagilimi-Istatistikleri-2023-53711&dil=1>





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