



Personal Stories / Testimonials

Insights from the Qualitative Research on Social and Behavior
Change Barriers and Drivers Study

To

Support Back-to-School

The Education Sector Working Group (ESWG) in Türkiye
2024

unicef 
for every child

Testimonials prepared by Dr. Selin Türkel, Dr. Altuğ Akın & Öykü Saraçoğlu
(Izmir University of Economics)

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For further information, please contact:
UNICEF Türkiye, Social and Behaviour Change

Section
Email: ankara@unicef.org

UNICEF Türkiye Country Office
Yıldız Kule, Yukarı Dikmen Mahallesi, Turan Güneş Bulvarı
No106 Kat 7 06550 Çankaya-Ankara/TÜRKİYE

T: +90 312 454 1000
F: +90 312 496 1461
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Testimonials



- 1 **Noura AKAR**
- 2 **Mohamad BAKRI HAMIDO**
- 3 **Fatma ABDULLAH**
- 4 **Rayan SEFRANI**
- 5 **Zeinab BAKRI HAMIDO**

1

Noura AKAR

Noura AKAR is a 37-year-old mother living in Sultanbeyli, Istanbul.



Testimonials

1

Noura Akar

She holds a deep conviction in the transformative power of education and firmly believes in her daughter's potential to achieve her goals. This confidence, which counters traditional expectations often placed on girls, fosters an environment where her daughter is encouraged to excel. Her support challenges social norms by prioritizing education and ambition, positioning her daughter not only as a source of family pride but also as an example for others in the community. ↘

"For her, education is the greatest priority in life. It's the key to reaching all positive outcomes. It enables us to improve ourselves... For instance, it allows us to grow, become more positive individuals in our work life, and enhance our ability to think critically. Ultimately, education is the means through which we attain all the good things in life."

"If I had the chance, I would return to school now because I've always wanted to. She wanted to study law. That's why, ever since I was a child, she's always told me: 'Do what I couldn't do.' She always wanted to be that way, and she wants the same for us. She tries to remove all the barriers in front of us, to open up paths that she never had, so we can live the life she couldn't."

I keep asking her, 'Do you think I'll succeed? Where do you see me?'. I tell her that mothers have a sense of these things. She sees me as a highly successful doctor ten years from now. She always tries to imagine the best for me. She truly believes that I will achieve what both of us dream of, that's what she hopes for. She feels the same way about my other siblings too. I have a sibling in the tenth grade.

"Her hope stems from her deep faith. She believes so firmly that when someone is tired and entrusts their struggles to God, they will eventually be rewarded—perhaps in ways we haven't even dreamed of. And that reward will bring us happiness. She believes that when we're worn out, something will appear to bring us joy. That's why she trusts and believes so deeply. She knows how much I want this, how hard I've been trying, and how exhausted I am. She really believes that I'll reach a good place."

Noura AKAR

Testimonials

1

Noura Akar

The mother defies traditional social expectations by prioritizing her child's growth and development over societal opinions. Rather than adhering to customary gender roles that often assign girls household responsibilities, she purposefully refrains from giving her daughter chores, focusing instead on supporting her child's ambitions. This intentional choice challenges entrenched gender norms, emphasizing the value of education and personal growth for girls. Through her actions, she sets a progressive example within her community, reinforcing a broader shift toward gender equality and empowering her daughter to pursue opportunities free from societal constraints. ➤

"Also, for example, I don't help my mom with house chores. She knocks on my door and brings me things like walnuts, almonds, and fruit juice. Sometimes people say, 'She doesn't help you at all at home'. They also make comments about me going out. And, as I mentioned, her uncles were quite dominant. Since she didn't have the chance to live life the way she wanted, her reaction has been the opposite. She doesn't care about anyone's opinions; she just wants her children to do what they want and experience life. So, no matter what people say, neither she nor my dad are influenced by anyone."

"When it comes to house chores or getting something from outside, my mom takes care of everything. My dad is at work all day long. He covers all my expenses. Whatever I ask for... Even if he has debts, whenever I need something for my education, whether it's a book or a pen, he gives it to me right away. For example, you probably know that the fee for our exam is quite high; it's 2500 this year. This is my third time taking the exam, and so far, I've spent 7500 just to be able to take it."

Noura AKAR

Testimonials

1

Noura Akar

Despite not speaking the language, the mother has never missed a school meeting. ↘

“When I started high school, my teachers were Turkish. My mom doesn’t know much Turkish, so she struggled a bit. But whenever there was a meeting, for instance, with the form teacher, she made sure to go. This showed that she cared. Sometimes I would stand next to her, and she would ask me to translate for her. So, it wasn’t much of an issue with the Turkish teachers; I just translated for her.”

The mother is a strong, positive, and resilient woman. ↘

“Because the situation in Syria started to become very difficult. I was about to start first grade, but I actually couldn’t. I didn’t get to attend either kindergarten or first grade at all. Later on, I skipped those classes. It was a tough time for her. But as I mentioned, I think I got that resilience from her. No matter how bad things get, she never gives up. She doesn’t show anyone her struggles; she just stays strong. Even now, no matter how bad things may be, she remains strong and doesn’t show anyone. She doesn’t let it affect others, and she never gives up.”

There is a strong bond between the mother and daughter. ↘

“My mom is truly my friend; I feel very comfortable around her, just like I do with my close friends. I share things with her that I can’t share with my closest friends. She knows everything about me; there’s nothing she doesn’t know. I talk to her about everything. We behave like friends, and since she’s not much older than I am, it makes it easier.”

“My mom says that parents should be selfless and patient and that children need to have trust in their parents. She also believes that the relationship should be more like a friendship rather than just a parent-child dynamic. It’s important to develop that bond so that the child can share everything with the mom, and the mom can respond in kind. She emphasizes that the most important thing is that we are all human; we can make mistakes. When a child makes a mistake, they should feel close enough to their mom to be able to talk about it openly so that the mom can stand by their side.”

“I mean, that’s how I am. Even if I make a mistake, I can go and tell my mom right away without being afraid. Because she never stands against me. I’ve completely built that trust with her.”

Noura AKAR

Testimonials

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Noura AKAR

Testimonials

1

Noura Akar

The mother and father agree about the power of education. ↘

“They have a strong mutual understanding on this topic because my dad also wished to pursue his education when he was a child. Their shared love for education strengthens their understanding of each other on this topic.”

As her daughter succeeds, the mother feels proud and shows it. ↘

“She was very happy at my high school graduation. She felt that all her sacrifices were not in vain and that I was very close to achieving my goals. High school is over, and I believe I will get into university. The realization of our dreams has finally come closer. That’s why she was so happy and proud.”

Noura AKAR 9

2

Mohamad BAKRI HAMIDO

Mohamad BAKRI HAMIDO is a 54-year-old Arabic teacher who also practices stone carving, living in Ataşehir, Istanbul.



Testimonials

2

**Mohamad
BAKRI
HAMIDO**

The father has a strong belief in the power of education. ↘

“My role as a father is to ensure that my sons, daughters, and children are not involved in this situation since there is no correct side to it. Thus, as I said, my responsibility as a father is to protect my children. The best way to do that is to culturally develop them, raise their awareness, and also pave the way for their education. For this reason, I have created a plan and outlined a map for myself. The first step is to learn Turkish because we came to Türkiye and are living here. Learning Turkish is a priority over Arabic.”

“My father initially mentioned that I needed to stay away from these people to achieve this success, and I needed to keep these individuals away from my children. For this reason, for example, we live in Istanbul; most people are living in Gaziantep, Kahramanmaraş, and nearby regions. But we moved away from there. We realized that we can't change society, but we hoped they wouldn't hinder our own transformation.”

The father is organized and conscious, prioritizing language to ensure his children's success. ↘

“Initially, my first step was to learn Turkish; I learned the basics of Turkish, at what you might call the A1-A2 level. After that, he taught me. Once he had taught me, I no longer needed someone else; I continued on my own. However, he set the groundwork for me. Thankfully, we succeeded in this. At the same time, we also focused on Arabic education.”

Mohamad BAK

Testimonials

2

**Mohamad
BAKRI
HAMIDO**

The father's commitment to his daughters' education reflects a progressive stance within his community's social and gender norms. Viewing education as both a right and a religious duty, he challenges prevailing societal expectations around gender roles. By actively supporting his daughters' learning, he not only empowers them but also subtly disrupts traditional norms, creating a protective environment that values girls' aspirations and potential. ↘

"According to the Quran, women are essentially like men, although there are certain differences. My father expresses that this is his responsibility. As a man, if I have come into this world, I must protect my daughters; this is my duty, even a sacred duty. The Quran also states that, like men, women have rights and responsibilities. We must provide these rights, but due to misunderstandings, this also undermines the Muslim identity."

"My responsibility as a father is to ensure that both my daughter and my son receive a proper education and to make them aware of their responsibilities, particularly those they have towards society."

"For six months, my grandfather did not speak to my father at all, not even a word. I wanted them to be the first example. At the same time, I was quite stubborn about ensuring their awareness and that they become educated individuals in society."

"My father says that when I started writing this story, during my first steps, people had already turned away from me. I was referred to with negative labels. We can say there was a psychological pressure or even a sociological pressure in this regard. Among people, I was seen as the bad guy; I was known very negatively. However, after achieving success and when they saw the respect people had for us, their perspectives changed dramatically. Those who initially referred to my father with negative traits and considered him a bad person came to apologize. Now, for example, they call me 'engineer lady' and my sister 'doctor lady' since she is about to start her doctorate. They even refer to my brother as 'teacher'."

Mohamad BAK

Testimonials

“My responsibility as a father is to ensure that both my daughter and my son receive a proper education and to make them aware of their responsibilities, particularly those they have towards society.”

Mohamad BAK

Testimonials

2

**Mohamad
BAKRI
HAMIDO**

"I live in Ataşehir, as I mentioned. I would say that our life here is quite independent from other people. We are far from relatives and also from a society that drags us down. In our relatives and society, it is considered haram for a girl to receive an education."

"Our village in Syria is where we belong. My sister's completion of her master's degree was the first example in the village; no woman had done this before. I am also a first in my own right; I was the first girl to enter the engineering faculty in our village."

"I would also like to mention that now many people, seeing us as an example, are starting to stop marrying off their daughters because of my father's success. For instance, if a girl reaches the age of 20 without getting married... However, there is a rule that if a girl turns 18 and is still unmarried, she is considered 'left on the shelf'."

"When they see us as educated, they approach us with marriage purposes. They say, 'We want to get married; can you give us your father's number?'. Because now people want a conscious and educated woman. Why did my father first say that lack of education and ignorance are the causes of war? We have a saying: 'The mother is the ummah, the mother is the nation.' meaning that women are the foundation of society. If women are unaware and uneducated, their children will also be uneducated. This has truly led us into war."

The father's support for his daughter's education, sports, and other pursuits challenges traditional gender norms, fostering an inclusive and open learning environment at home. By encouraging her growth in areas beyond conventional expectations, he actively redefines the roles and opportunities available to girls in his community. This approach not only nurtures his daughter's confidence and abilities but also sets a powerful example, promoting a shift in social norms around gender equality and empowerment. ↘

"What I mean is, how can I put it, each of us is different, and we need to embrace these differences. We should be versatile. In fact, last year my father brought me books and said he would teach me about electricity because he has expertise in that area. He can show the books now. He even had my brother bring a board and get wires and other materials. He said, 'I will teach you electricity!'"

Mohamad BAK

Testimonials

2

**Mohamad
BAKRI
HAMIDO**

The father couldn't receive a formal education, but he has become self-taught. ↘

"My father left school in the sixth grade. He attended school until halfway through seventh grade and then dropped out. I can't even write my name because the education level and quality were very poor. My grandmother doesn't know how to read or write either. My grandfather worked in construction from morning until evening and was very busy, so he had no time to devote to education. Because of these reasons, he says my education was unsuccessful due to both the family's lack of education and not spending enough time with the child."

"During his military service, my father met a friend who helped him start his education. Thanks to him, he began to learn reading, Arabic, life, and his religion in many ways. Whenever there was a scholar or a good, respectful person, either during or after his military service, he would go to them to seek education. I am grateful that I learned Arabic grammar, and the complex texts of Arabic literature—because we have some challenging books—religious rulings, and the current formation of Islamic knowledge, including the Quran. You could say he initially received traditional madrasa education, starting with Sufi madrasa training."

Mohamad BAK

3

Fatma ABDULLAH

Fatma ABDULLAH is a 33-year-old mathematics teacher living in Sultanbeyli, Istanbul.



Testimonials

3

**Fatma
ABDULLAH**

She received support from her teachers, similar to herself. ↘

“I studied engineering in Syria. I came here to study because of the wars. When did I arrive? I came here 13 years ago. I used to live in Hatay, staying in a camp. I began my studies in that camp. You know what a camp is like; there’s nothing in it. There’s no hope, nothing at all. But I studied in Syria before coming here. I didn’t expect such a situation; it was very difficult for me. Then, a teacher approached me and said he would apply for university on my behalf. I didn’t believe it at first. Many had claimed they would help, but then they didn’t follow through. Then they interviewed me, and I was skeptical. But then he insisted that he was telling the truth and would apply for me. He did, and I got accepted. I studied in Van and completed my education in elementary mathematics teaching.”

She goes beyond traditional teaching roles by offering emotional support, cultivating strong, trusting relationships, and actively tracking her students’ progress.

By prioritizing their well-being and personal growth, she challenges conventional gendered expectations of educators, creating a nurturing environment that values each student’s unique potential and resilience. Her approach reinforces the importance of holistic support in education, fostering a space where students feel both supported and empowered to succeed. ↘

“Students seek support before education. It’s important to listen to them. Listening to their stories, events, and difficulties—how much can I tell you? It was very challenging for me; I didn’t expect it to be this way. I was surprised when I started. They see me, and they say, ‘Teacher, this is what we’re going through.’ During lessons, I talk for an hour and spend half an hour on actual teaching.”

“For instance, my class finishes at noon. We often extend it until 2 or 3 o’clock. We either have breakfast together or we just sit together. For instance, we might go outside or stay here. However, I really appreciate these experiences.”

Fatma ABDULLAH

Testimonials

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Fatma ABDULLI

Testimonials

3

**Fatma
ABDULLAH**

“Or there isn’t just a need to explain. The information is missing, and the circumstances are insufficient. Everything is deficient.”

“So, for example, how did I manage it? You can provide guidance for listening and talking in a more personal way. How can I demonstrate this to them? Tell them some stories. I depict the challenging days I’ve faced or my work experiences. Life is not easy, whether it’s here or out there. I want to show them this aspect. If you’re going outside, it’s the same. You can engage with the same individuals here or out there. I offer substantial support on these matters.”

“I mean, for example, I tell Zeynep, ‘Honestly, Zeynep, your situation is very normal; I experienced the same thing myself.’”

“They are amazing girls. For example, they haven’t come to see me for a few months, even four months. I keep wondering why they aren’t coming. They aren’t like that. Maybe they don’t come, but they send me messages. Then it crossed my mind why aren’t they coming? There must be something going on. They don’t have WhatsApp. No calls, no Instagram, no Facebook. Something is definitely happening. I called their family. The mother said she is really doing well, but I don’t understand why she is behaving this way; I believe it’s due to economic reasons. She said, ‘I’m not sending my daughters to school right now.’”

“This is what happened; it happened like that with my mother too. My mother threw books at us and ripped them apart. We have faced violence in many forms. Despite all the violence we experience here... We’re working now and will be getting paid. They said they would run away. I told the girls to calm down. ‘Where will you go? I’m here. If something happens, I will come to get you. Just stay calm.’ Then I told someone about this; that person offered support. But they made a mistake.”

Fatma ABDULLAH

Testimonials

3

**Fatma
ABDULLAH**

The teacher is mindful of the societal prejudices that often surround the Syrian community. Recognizing these biases, she approaches her work with a commitment to inclusivity, aiming to create an environment where all students, regardless of background, feel valued and respected. Her awareness reflects an understanding of the broader social norms at play, and she actively works to challenge these biases within her classroom. ↘

“No, no. You escaped from Syria. You didn’t do anything for Syria. Look at what they are doing for Palestine; you haven’t done anything. That child said he doesn’t want to stay in Türkiye for another year. He’s going to run away. What should I say to him? For example, one person says you escaped from the war. You haven’t done anything for your homeland; you ran away. This statement carries great weight. It’s truly substantial for us.”

“Before this incident came to me, the teacher said, ‘I told the guidance counselor.’ He said, ‘You Syrians get married young.’ That may be true, but the girl is telling you that she doesn’t want to. Yes, some individuals might marry young. The same applies in Türkiye; marrying young happens everywhere. So, it’s not right to generalize. I’m explaining that I don’t want this. The teacher said, ‘I don’t know what to do.’ The guidance counselor didn’t solve the issue either. They were supposed to report it to the police. She warned against it, saying, ‘Don’t report it to the police; they will expel us, and we’ll have to go back to Syria.’ Because currently, when the police receive a complaint, they gather the whole family and deport them. Unfortunately, that’s the reality. Neither the teacher nor the guidance counselor took any action.”

“I truly feel very sorry for the students. If you want to conduct a real research study, you can go to school and ask the students. They have zero hope. I’ve been assigned a job to gather high school students. The principal said the same thing: maybe you can provide them with support. I call all of them. Why? What will happen? What will you do? I mean, right now... I also need someone to provide me with psychological support. Because I understand them. I’m being honest.”

Fatma ABDULLAH

Rayan SEFRANI

Rayan SEFRANI, an 18-year-old from Sultanbeyli, Istanbul, preparing for medical school after graduating high school



Testimonials

4

**Rayan
SEFRANI**

Family support and involvement are shaped by social norms that dictate the roles and expectations of family members in a child's education and development. In many cultures, families are seen as key contributors to a child's success, with parents often expected to provide not only emotional support but also practical assistance in academic and extracurricular activities. However, social norms can also influence the extent to which family members—particularly mothers or fathers—engage in their children's education. In some contexts, certain roles may be more closely aligned with gender expectations, with mothers traditionally seen as the primary caregivers and fathers more involved in financial support. When families challenge these norms and actively collaborate in their children's learning, it fosters a more inclusive and supportive environment for all members, encouraging positive outcomes. ↗

"I suppose we're going to come back to the family. Everything starts from there. For instance, if my family hadn't guided me to pursue education since I was a child, I wouldn't be the person I am today. It all begins with the family."

"Studying and completing university is essential for us. They see my efforts. I really want to attend university; I'm always striving for that, wanting to pursue medicine. Since I was little, they've been supportive of me. For instance, they don't make me do any chores at home just so I can focus on my education."

"Therefore, her greatest dream is for us to pursue our education. She couldn't study herself, so she wants us to go to school and get into the departments we want."

Rayan SEFRANI

Testimonials

4

**Rayan
SEFRANI**

“But everyone emphasizes the importance of education. They say, ‘You should study, even if you’re a girl, because, in the end, the only thing that will save you is your education.’ Money may not even be a factor. In the future, despite studying, you might still not find a job, or your financial situation could still be bad. At least your mindset will change, and you will become a better person. The more you study, the better you develop yourself. My family is actually like that too. Ever since I was little, even when I was just four... I came here when I was in the 4th grade and studied the 4th grade here. I was just about to start the 1st grade in Syria when the war began, so I couldn’t go. Despite that, my family started teaching me at home. For example, my mom helped me study at home so that I wouldn’t fall behind. Then I started school. We had to relocate to a different city right away as the conditions there were rapidly worsening.”

“He always says, ‘No matter what you want, I am here to support you. I’ll stand by you until you achieve what you want.’. My mom is just as supportive.”

“Because when I see them, I think I can’t let down someone who has made so many sacrifices for me. I can’t face them with failure. That’s why seeing them motivates me to work even harder. Despite having gone through terrible situations, having come from war, and encountering racism here, I still want to continue. Because at least, even if the whole world stands against me, my parents are making sacrifices for me; that’s why I can keep pushing forward.”

“There is also trust. For instance, I go everywhere—courses, meetings, and so on. I go out, come home in the evening, and they don’t say anything. In the end, they trust me. They think that if there is trust, nothing bad will happen.”

“They made me study so hard at home that I didn’t need to repeat the first grade; I immediately moved on to the second grade so I wouldn’t lose a year. So, I started.”

“Well, as I said, our family loves education. Since my childhood, I’ve thought, why would I take my daughter out of school to make her work? My father says, ‘I can work now. I’m in a position to provide you with financial support. So don’t miss this opportunity; go and study.’ For example, my younger brother is in 10th grade now. Last summer, my father didn’t make him work either. We actually need the money; sometimes we have debts, especially with the recent economic difficulties. But still, he didn’t make him work. He said, ‘Go find a course, learn to swim, develop yourself.’”

Rayan SEFRANI

Testimonials

4

**Rayan
SEFRANI**

Thanks to the Teachers who Overcame the Language Barrier Early ↘

“We had one Turkish teacher who taught us Turkish. He was the only Turkish teacher; the others spoke Arabic. Then, in the 7th grade, the school closed down, and they informed us that we needed to study alongside Turkish students. I moved to the 8th grade. I have some knowledge of Turkish; I learned a bit, but I still can't speak it very well. I have a good understanding of the rules and am quite proficient in terms of language knowledge. During that time, I was ahead of my Turkish classmates, and even the teachers were surprised at how my language skills were better.”

“Exactly, we tend to win over our teachers more. Also, since we speak Turkish, we have been successful in our lessons. Language really helps to solve many significant issues.”

“Yes, some struggled with the language. For us, we overcame that stage; we faced difficulties, but we continued because we knew we could get through it. Some couldn't handle it. They thought, ‘I don't know Turkish; why should I transfer to a Turkish school?’ and dropped out. They pursued other jobs. Some don't like it and want to work instead. Likewise, some tend to give up rather quickly. From what I've seen, some don't want it themselves. But they have their own reasons. Additionally, some have fallen behind because of the war. For example, a girl might come here at 18 and still be in the 6th grade.”

“Absolutely, because they can communicate better and express themselves more. For instance, if someone faced racism or another issue, they might find it difficult to express themselves. However, because we can express ourselves, we made friends with them; we helped them, and they saw us as better people and became closer to us.”

Rayan SEFRANI

Testimonials

4

**Rayan
SEFRANI**

Resilient and Determined: Overcoming Discrimination and Challenging Social Norms ↘

"I also experienced some racism in the 8th grade. For instance, when I raised my hand in class, others would tell me things like, 'Put your hand down, you can't speak,' and comments like that. Particularly when the teachers were happy with me, they seemed to view me more negatively, saying things like, 'You're taking our place; why are they looking at you favorably?'. Despite this, this motivated me to work even harder. At that time, COVID-19 had started, so there was no second term. I was the top student in the first term among the 8th graders, achieving first place. With my level of Turkish, I still managed to come out on top. My grade-point average was around 92."

"I have always been a hardworking student since childhood; I enjoy studying. Even if I have free time, I like to sit down and study. Now that I have graduated from high school, I am grateful that my grade-point average is still high. Unfortunately, I didn't get into university this year, so I am preparing to try again. However, I still have the desire to pursue my goals; I haven't given up. They often say I should consider dentistry, but I still want to study medicine. I want to become a surgeon. They say it will take a long time; 10 years, 15 years, or even 20 years. Regardless, those years will pass whether I choose to study or not."

"I am constantly improving myself. For example, even if the Student Admission Examination (YÖS) exam is over, I will immediately start learning English. My dad says I'm the type of person who never likes to stop. I believe there is always more to learn in education, no matter how much we have already learned. That's why I really don't like to stop. Maybe that's why I love medicine so much; I am always learning new things."

"Perhaps I will learn English and apply for scholarships abroad. I've considered going abroad. But why did I think this way? If all opportunities here are closed off, I will be forced to go because I don't want to give up on my dreams."

Rayan SEFRANI

Testimonials

“Perhaps I will learn English and apply for scholarships abroad. I’ve considered going abroad. But why did I think this way? If all opportunities here are closed off, I will be forced to go because I don’t want to give up on my dreams.”

Testimonials

4

**Rayan
SEFRANI**

Even though there are financial challenges, she wants to pursue her education by finding a scholarship. ↘

“Exactly. Even if I get into medical school, my dad said it would still be difficult if I didn’t get a scholarship. This year, the fees are around \$9,000 to \$10,000 annually, and I will be studying for six years. We could never come up with that amount. Plus, everything here is based on rent... The only property I own is a house in Syria. If I sell it, I still won’t be able to afford even one year of studies. That’s because the Syrian lira is very low compared to here. So, I hope that if I achieve high grades, I might get a scholarship and continue my education. Otherwise, there’s no chance I can enroll.”

Has Found Happiness at Imam Hatip, where the social norms of acceptance and equality prevail, fostering an environment free from racism and discrimination ↘

“Let’s say, for instance, even if someone didn’t like us, they still had to be respectful. For example, not everyone there liked us, but no one could cause us any discomfort. Because it was an Imam Hatip high school, people had to show respect. No one ever caused us any trouble, and we spent four years studying comfortably without facing racism or anything like that. I know there are others who have gone through much worse.”

“There were indeed people who were bothered by this. They would say, ‘You already know Arabic.’ Well, you should also score high in literature and in your Turkish classes. However, we were successful not just in Arabic and the Quran, but in all subjects.”

Has achieved success despite the prevailing social norms of bias and discrimination from teachers, overcoming systemic barriers that often undermine students from vulnerable backgrounds. ↘

“My grade was 92, and I received a certificate of merit. He looked at me, stared at my face, then looked away again before glancing back at me. He asked, ‘Did you receive a certificate of merit?’. I replied, ‘Yes, why wouldn’t I?’. He was so surprised, as he never expected it from me. Before that, he was never friendly in his interactions with me. But despite that, he hugged me insincerely. I even noticed that. There are definitely teachers like that.”

Testimonials

4

**Rayan
SEFRANI**

Has developed strong coping mechanisms to navigate and resist discrimination, leveraging personal resilience and a deep understanding of the social norms that perpetuate bias. ↘

“In the fourth grade, how should I put it, I had been living here for four years, and I know how to deal with racism.”

“Actually, in every country and every society, there are both good and bad individuals. This is also true for the Syrian population. However, unfortunately, we are viewed as a whole.”

“Actually, this was a positive aspect of us. Let’s say I saw a bad person; I would do everything I could to make them like me. I would overlook the wrongs they did to me, thinking they would eventually come to like me. And it turned out to be true, much like the story of that teacher.”

“For instance, when we see that some people don’t like refugees or Syrians, we feel compelled to do something good to change that perception. We have this positive trait. We are showing that we are here too, that we can accomplish things, and that we want to succeed. As a result, they genuinely start to like us. They think, ‘I can’t treat someone who wants to succeed this badly in a bad way!’. That’s why they are good to us.”

Eager to help other immigrant children voluntarily and has also received support herself. ↘

“(For mentorship) Because, for example, we have tried and experienced these things. We want to encourage younger children, particularly those in elementary and middle school, to come to us and share their problems when they face difficulties. As long as they don’t drop out of school, that’s our common goal; we will hopefully work on this with the teacher. We will discuss such a project.”

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Zeinab BAKRI HAMIDO

Zeinab BAKRI HAMIDO is an 18-year-old civil engineering student living in Ataşehir, Istanbul.



Testimonials

5

**Zeinab
BAKRI
HAMIDO**

Family Support and Attention. ↘

“But still, we are trying to fulfill the dreams of my older brothers, who have given up on their education. At the same time, they did not neglect their own personal development either. They needed to work because my father was not able to support us.”

“Every child wants to watch cartoons. However, mine were in English so I could benefit from them. When we came to Türkiye, I actually had a program that required me to study Turkish, and Arabic, and also work on my English once a week.”

“After that, my father was trying to provide me with educational opportunities that would contribute both to my personal development and to my Muslim identity. Of course, these trainings took place at home for me. I had my own corner at home; in fact, there was a study room. Additionally, we had a whiteboard at home. Because my father didn’t go to school when he was young and learned to read and write at the age of 20.”

“Because when a person receives an education and knows how to navigate life, they feel more at ease. My father saw this too. Additionally, he faced many financial difficulties during his youth and childhood. He always tells us to pursue our education so that we don’t have to go through those struggles. My father emphasizes this as well.”

“Sometimes my mom says, ‘Come here and help me.’. My dad does it; he takes care of that instead of me. After all, he sits around as well. My father invites me to read books every day. He even wants to see me beside him during our prayers, saying, ‘Come, let’s pray together.’”

“There’s also a strong mother who takes on all the responsibilities. I remember my mom would pray when I had an exam; just her prayers were enough. She manages all the household chores—cooking, laundry, and everything else—just because I have an exam.”

“When I moved up to high school, my father signed me up for an English course before I started 7th grade and also ensured I learned how to swim. The swimming course was quite far from our home at that time. Going in the morning was more cost-effective, as evening sessions were more expensive. He would wake up at 6 AM and wait for me for an hour, regardless of whether it was summer or winter. He took me to swimming lessons for a year until I learned how to swim. This could have continued, but then the pandemic hit, and everything stopped. Along with swimming, my father also taught me taekwondo and covered all the expenses for it. Currently, I hold a second-degree black belt in martial arts.”

Zeinab BAKRI

Testimonials

5

**Zeinab
BAKRI
HAMIDO**

“Instead, we are thinking about applying for scholarships available in Türkiye. My father researched tirelessly day and night about what I should write in my statement of purpose, how my CV should be formatted, and what should be included. He put a tremendous amount of effort into this over the past two years. I have volunteered in many different places and participated in numerous training programs. I even attended a costly program offered by Harvard University, which charges in dollars, but fortunately, I was awarded a scholarship there, completed the course, and received the certificate.”

Driven by his belief in his daughter’s right to education, the father has been willing to challenge family expectations and social norms, even at the cost of family harmony. His actions reflect a commitment to redefining gender roles and advocating for opportunities that might otherwise be limited by traditional views within his community. ↗

“My grandfather didn’t speak to my dad for about 2 years when my sister was going to university 6 or 7 years ago; she studied in Uşak. My grandfather was really upset. He said, ‘Why are you sending your daughter to school? You’re in Istanbul and sending her to Uşak.’ My sister completed her undergraduate degree in Uşak and then finished her master’s in Ankara. My father was willing to take that risk. He said, ‘Don’t talk to me, but my daughter needs to be educated.’ My father went through a lot for us and didn’t pay attention to what other people said.”

Has received significant support from the employees of the non-governmental organizations and the teachers working there. ↘

“Certainly, our successes are partly due to our participation in this organization. To be honest, it has been beneficial for my personal development, and I actually started my first journey to university here two years ago. **(Child and Youth Center; ÇOGEM)”**

“Yes, as you mentioned, it’s a collaborative effort. Then, at the Student Admission Examination (YÖS) course, Mrs. Fatma said to me, ‘You know English, right?’. Her name is Fatma Abdullah. There, I started teaching English to the children alongside the YÖS preparation. We receive education from them while also providing education to others. It’s a mutual organization; we take from each other and give back as well. **(Child and Youth Center; ÇOGEM)”**

Zeinab BAKRI

Testimonials

5

**Zeinab
BAKRI
HAMIDO**

They were very attentive on this matter. Three or four days later, he called me and told me that he had found a better dormitory and a better scholarship for me. He also said he would help further. Without me even asking, he donated to support my university preparations. He also introduced me to the International Students Association, where I can volunteer and focus on my personal development. They provide significant support regarding education."

"In fact, it continues to have an impact now because the people at that organization in Erzurum, when they saw my CV, included Mr. Halil İbrahim and Ms. Hüsrâ... Of course, I need to mention their names since they also searched for me and paved the way for me. They were genuinely pleased when they saw my CV. My CV is actually two pages long and includes my work experience, which is definitely important."

Found a Supportive Community at Imam Hatip,
Free from Stigma and Discrimination. ↗

"I had a really good time at the Anatolian High School; however, I also have a culture I was raised in at home. This culture encompasses both Arab and Muslim influences. Ultimately, we are influenced by Arabs; I can refer to the Arab aspect as Arab culture. The Muslim culture, of course, is somewhat different. However, the most dominant culture, particularly at home, was Muslim. I noticed that when I attended the Anatolian High School, my identity conflicted with that environment. The identity I grew up with, the one in which I felt comfortable and discovered myself, clashes with what I encountered at the Anatolian High School."

"Normal high school conflicts with my Muslim culture. For instance, there were discussions about alcohol, implying that the family drinks. There were also mentions of smoking and inappropriate dressing. Of course, everyone has their own opinions, but I chose not to participate."

"Then I told my father that Imam Hatip seemed better to me and that I wanted to go there. Of course, he didn't say anything about it. But I've realized something about Imam Hatip. I've attended many schools and classes, and I noticed that the administration at Imam Hatip is more conscious and more helpful."

Zeinab BAKRI

Testimonials

5

**Zeinab
BAKRI
HAMIDO**

“Imam Hatip might be a better option for many Arab and Syrian students because I can say there is less racism there. This is largely due to the discipline imposed by the teachers. For instance, the teachers came and spoke. The class teacher addressed us strictly and seriously, holding the discipline papers in hand, saying, ‘I could write you up right now. I don’t want to jeopardize your future.’ The administration supported this as well. So, the administration was helpful in this matter.”

Resilient and determined, she navigate and challenge discriminatory social norms with strength, pushing back against biases that limit opportunities. Her commitment to success, despite societal pressures, reflects a powerful defiance against prejudice, highlighting a drive to not only achieve personal goals but to shift perspectives within her community. ↘

“The teacher saw that I was eager to achieve. Then, he started giving me more reference books. Back then, my Turkish was really poor. I could speak, that wasn’t an issue, but I struggled with Turkish class. It was always my lowest grade. He increased my grade through my oral exam score. There was one course I couldn’t understand—Democracy. The teacher didn’t teach it well. There was also Traffic; once again, he increased those grades through oral exams. Those were the only subjects I struggled with. I was passing Math, Science, and the rest”

“In fact, having a good neighbor keeps us from seeing the bad ones. For example, we have a good neighbor. Another is bad, and the other one is actually her daughter-in-law. But we focus on the mother-in-law, not on the daughter-in-law. We don’t even notice her. Yes, the elderly lady is really very kind. She really is. She was going to Kastamonu for Eid al-Adha, and she came to say goodbye to us, in tears.”

“Those who support me are, of course, the principal here and the teacher over there. Financial issues have never been an obstacle for me, and they do not demotivate me.”

“Physical challenges will always continue. We need to remain mentally strong. I’ve come to this conclusion after all my experiences. I believe I’ve gone through a lot.”

Zeinab BAKRI

Testimonials

Those who support me are, of course, the principal here and the teacher over there. Financial issues have never been an obstacle for me, and they do not demotivate me.

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UNICEF TÜRKİYE

Yıldız Kule, Yukarı Dikmen Mahallesi, Turan Güneş Bulvarı
No106 Kat 7 06550 Çankaya-Ankara/TÜRKİYE

Tel: +90 312 454 1000

Fax: +90 312 496 1461

E-mail: ankara@unicef.org

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for every child