



Turkish women's long road to equality

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Ahead of Sunday's general election in Turkey, the BBC's Sarah Rainsford in Istanbul reports on the battle to get women into positions of influence.

"I'm not beautiful anymore, I'm all shrivelled up!" Sehiban laments, as she tucks into a breakfast of boiled eggs and hot tea.

This old lady has history carved deep into her face.

Sehiban was just a girl when women in Turkey got the right to vote. It was a first major step towards equality, but since then progress has been painfully slow.

In the room next door, the next three generations of her family eat together - women aged from 14 to 60.

The family migrated to Istanbul from their distant village two decades ago. But even here, Turkey's much-hailed modernisation passed by many.

"I never went to school, I wasn't sent there," says Medina, the next oldest. "I can't read and I can't write. I brought up five children, and spent my life at home."

Over in uptown Istanbul, Medina's daughter goes out to make a living cleaning other peoples' homes.

Gulseren did go to school, but she left at the age of 11, like many women her age. Cleaning is about the best work she can get.

Gulseren admits she cries at times from the hardship. It's hope for the future that keeps her going.

"I want my daughter to have a better life, I don't want her to be oppressed," she confides during a coffee break.

"I hope she can get a good job and make good money, and then her children can do even better."

Stark figures

Life for women like Gulseren is gradually improving. But women were only made equal to men in law here five years ago.

A report for the World Economic Forum late last year showed Turkey still lags far behind Europe in practice - 105th out of 115 countries, in terms of gender equality.

That is despite the reforms of Mustafa Kemal Ataturk, who founded Turkey as a modern, Western-looking republic eight decades ago.

"The idea that Ataturk saved women and that the job is already done in many senses held Turkey back. People

fell into passivity," argues Nigar Goksel, analyst with the European Stability Institute in Istanbul.

It has just produced a report on the role of women here.

"Economically and politically, women's participation is still terribly low. Twenty-eight percent of women of working age work and the majority are unpaid.

"They work the family fields and milk the family cow. That does not necessarily empower them."

The figures for politics are starker still.

Just 4.4% of the current parliament are women and in local politics that figure is less than 1%. But at this election efforts are afoot to change all that.

Finding a voice

At Istanbul's Grand Bazaar last week, Canan Kalsin was out campaigning for votes - handing red and pink carnations to stall holders.

A tiny blonde, she is one of dozens of women, fighting for a seat in parliament.

Canan Kalsin is standing for the ruling AK Party - a religious conservative government that has, ironically, overseen some of the most radical reforms regarding women since Ataturk's time.

"Getting more women into parliament will give voice to the other half of Turkey's population," Canan says. She believes other reforms could then follow much faster.

"It will help women raise their demands."

The political parties have recruited a record number of women candidates to their election lists this year.

Activists are hoping female candidates can win 10% of all seats. It is not ideal, but a start.

"Changing politics is simple. The party leader makes a list and puts one woman on it for every two men. It could make a huge difference," says Nigar Goksel.

"Improving economic participation and access to education takes time though, and it needs political will. That will only come about when there are more women in politics to bring it on."

Back home, Gulseren and her daughter flick through a box of family photos.

At 14, Burcu is already planning a future far beyond her family's horizons. She has just made the grade to study at beauty school. Her dream is to run her own salon.

"It's a good business," she explains, with a smile. "I want to have lots of customers and one day perhaps be a stylist for high society."

As the fourth female generation of the Turkish republic, there is every chance Burcu can make her dream reality, as Turkish women come closer than ever to full equality.