

**AS WE CELEBRATE
THE 100TH ANNIVERSARY
OF THE REPUBLIC,
WE HAVE AN
UNFINISHED ISSUE**



As we begin celebrating the 100th anniversary of the Turkish Republic in these early days of 2023, I would like to take this moment to review the recent past and voice our hopes, expectations and resolutions for the second century of the Republic.

Over recent years we have faced challenge upon challenge, the pandemic, war, and economic difficulties, which have led to uncertainty and insecurity in our expectations for the future, further deepening inequalities. **Women and girls have emerged again as the group hardest hit by these inequalities both in our country and around the world.** With the worsening of economic difficulties, the burden of care, domestic violence, and gender-based prejudices, we have fallen further behind in terms of access to work, education, and social life.

The founder of our country, the **Great Leader Mustafa Kemal Atatürk** emphasized how important it was for women in a developed society to hold an equal position with men in all areas of social and professional life. When the foundations of the Republic were being laid, he said, paving the way for women in the struggle, **“This nation will not flourish with the progress of men alone.”** And yet we are still not where we need to be as the Republic enters its 100th year, **despite the many achievements we have already made.**

The World Economic Forum’s Global Gender Gap Report¹, published in 2022, along with many others, expose the full gravity of the situation, which is completely unacceptable.

This is exactly why I would like to address you this year on the subject of "equal opportunities" for women and girls and emphasize that we do not have any more time to lose. As we enter the second century of the Republic, we should focus not only on our gains, but also on what we have failed to achieve, and we should continue to work rigorously to combat the inequalities that manifest themselves in many areas.

■ We Are Still Not Where We Should Be In Girls' Education

We believe that opportunities are only valuable when they are presented with the principle of equality for all children. Families have an important role to play in helping girls develop the self-confidence to challenge entrenched gender norms they encounter throughout their lives and to help them grow up with an egalitarian perspective. **The equality that begins in the family must be equally nurtured in the educational system.** We are pleased to say that we have achieved significant gains in our country in improving girls' access to education thanks to the efforts of public institutions and civil society organizations. Our schooling rates in compulsory education levels have reached 90 percent. But the other thing that we need to focus on, just as strongly as the rise of schooling rates, is the quality of education and supporting teachers. There are also important issues in girls' education that need to be addressed. We know that there are hundreds of thousands of girls today who can't go to school for various reasons. According to UNICEF, 129 million girls² worldwide are out of school. To fight this problem, we must tackle those obstacles which prevent girls from attending school such as early and forced marriages, the burden of domestic care, menstrual taboo, disability, poverty, and the like. Such issues cannot be ignored or tolerated.

We, as the private sector, public institutions, academia, civil society organizations and especially, families, must be the driving force that will pave the way for girls to receive a quality education and success in their professional lives, and we must work with all our might for this without compromising.

■ Women Should Be Equally Present In Science and Technology

Another issue that we need to focus more on in the new century is **to ensure that girls choose the professions they want and advance in fields such as science, technology, engineering, and mathematics where they are less represented.** In today's world where science and technology are rapidly advancing, girls still have to contend with the gender roles they encounter when choosing a profession.

According to the Global Gender Gap Report, the rate of women choosing to pursue STEM degrees in Turkey stands at just 14 percent.³



² <https://www.unicef.org/education/girls-education>

³ https://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_GGGR_2021.pdf (page 378)

We can never accept this rate as we are entering the centennial year of the Republic. I believe that it is necessary to keep this issue on the agenda in order to increase the quality of education, encourage girls to enter this field and combat gender inequality in their professions of choice so that girls can set goals for themselves in the STEM field. Because we know that when given the opportunity, girls pursue their dreams and achieve world-changing success. We proudly follow the achievements of women who have inspired the whole world, including the late Safiye Ali, the first female medical doctor of the Republic, which we inherited from Atatürk; Muazzez İlmiye Çığ, the first female Sumerologist; Prof. Dr. Feryal Özel, an astrophysicist who is a pioneer in working out how to capture vivid portraits of distant black holes; and Prof. Dr. Özlem Türeci who developed the vaccine that changed the course of the pandemic.

A Girl Changes, The World Changes

When we believe in girls and remove the obstacles in front of them, we see that they become successful and inspiring women of the future. We observed one of the best examples of this in the village of Kolluca in Sivas. As Sabancı Foundation, on October 11, International Day of the Girl Child, we brought a heartwarming true story from our country to the screens with the message “A Girl Changes, The World Changes”, in which we emphasized the importance of equal opportunities⁴. The story follows a girl as she is admitted to medical school and sets an example to other girls in the village as well as their families and friends. If today's Kolluca village of Sivas, with a population of 200, has trained tens of female doctors, it has been made possible by the determination of girls and their families, who see their potential and encourage them and give them opportunities. We believe that a small change in the life of a girl who is given the opportunity to follow her dreams will grow like a snowball and have the power to change her country and even the world. Our task is now to encourage more of **these positive examples, making them more visible, encouraging other families in other villages.**

Achieving Gender Equality Is The Right Business Decision

We know that the presence of women in the workforce, along with education, is a fundamental right and a **driving force** for social development. When we look at the global data, we see that the increase in the participation of women in the workforce over the last 30 years not only affects their socioeconomic situation but also their families, their milieu, and society as a whole.

⁴ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6phTtNIXEFo&ab_channel=Sabanc%C4%B1Foundation

According to a study conducted by the International Labor Organization, the productivity and reputation of companies that have internal policies for gender equality and support women's participation in the workforce **improve by 60 percent.**⁵



Similar research conducted in many companies shows that **supporting gender equality and ensuring the equal participation of women in the workforce is “the right business decision” for companies.** And I am sure that in the upcoming period, the business community, always aiming at making the right decisions and achieving successful results, will take stronger steps to include educated and determined women in the workforce. I believe that business world will be a driver for more women to participate in the workforce, get to the top of their careers, and increase women's representation, especially in STEM.

We Will Continue to Work Unwaveringly for Equality

As it has been until now, in the second century of our Republic, we will continue to work unwaveringly, like a river cuts through rock, for women and girls to be present equally in all walks of life. Our duty is to support non-governmental organizations fighting for equality, the women's movement in particular, make good examples visible, and cooperate with public institutions, the private sector, and academic stakeholders. As I said at the beginning of my letter, **we do not have any more time to lose in this unfinished struggle for equality.**

I wish you all a happy new year in which we will take firm steps toward the dream of an egalitarian society, and I congratulate the centennial of our Republic.

Güler Sabancı
Chair, Board of Trustees of the Sabancı Foundation