

## GLOBAL VOICES

# Romany Gypsies and Kurds compete with each other for survival

Ceren Suntekin is trying to help two ethnic groups live side by side in one of Istanbul's poor neighbourhoods. They need everything from tables for studying to basic knowledge about how to bring up children

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Fights are a regular occurrence among those at the bottom of Turkey's social ladder, explains social educator Ceren Suntekin. Space is cramped and the possibilities so few that in a neighbourhood such as Tarlabasi in Istanbul it is not unusual for the two groups to come to blows. In simple terms, the generally more conservative Kurds find the gypsy tradition for music and alcohol both provocative and offensive. There was a time when the Romany gypsies had Tarlabasi to themselves but in recent years there has been a steady influx of Kurdish migrants from the villages of East Anatolia.

The above-mentioned tensions are one of the reasons why there is a need for a social educator such as Ceren Suntekin, who works at Tarlabasi Social Centre.

Here, for the first time, the neighbourhood's children have been given the chance to get to know each other.

The families in Tarlabasi generally have many children, precious little space and are extremely poor. There are no playgrounds as such, save a rickety mobile merry-go-round that is pulled through the streets by a man who makes a living cranking its handle. Illiteracy in Tarlabasi is more the rule than the exception, as is dome-

stic violence, and many children are forced to accompany their fathers to work. This means they sew clothes or repair cars and for Romany children it may mean walking around with their families, performing and singing in restaurants. For some it is an activity that goes on after school; for others it is something they do instead of going to school.

"They are poor migrant children and there is no room for them to do their homework at home. There are no tables at which to sit and study, so we provide those. We help them with their schooling and their mental development. They can come here, at the centre, after school and do their homework with our volunteers. We also offer lessons in English, maths, music and drama," says Ceren Suntekin.

Beyond their stereotypical prejudices about 'the others', children in Tarlabasi often take very little from home. Even basic upbringing is sometimes beyond many families, who therefore ask the centre for help.

"We teach them some of life's basic skills so they are able to solve their everyday problems. Such as how to get the things they want. The parents can't talk to their children about this and so they ask us to act as go-betweens. They know it's important but they can't do it themselves."

## Basic requirements

In order to use the centre the parents not only have to give their permission but are required to visit the centre and see first-hand what goes on there so the social educators avoid the risk of rumours spreading.

"We always talk to the families and get their permission to bring the children to the centre. Children mostly hear about us from their friends and to take part in centre activities we tell them they have to bring a parent who can follow the les-



sons. The parents typically ask about our political leanings and who we work with,” says Ceren Suntekin, whose work is funded by an EU grant and support from the nearby Bilgi University.

### Controlling anger

One of the centre’s successes has been to break down some of the barriers between the two ethnic groups. The 200 children who come to the centre every week do their homework in the same room and are now so familiar with the ‘other’s culture’ that the Kurdish children are able to dance along to the Romany music – a fact that brings a smile to the faces of centre staff.

“They also come here to improve their self-confidence and the teachers tell us that the children change when they come here. They relate better to one another and do better at school. We also see that our children experience fewer problems and last year, for example, we ran a children’s workshop on how to control anger. We wanted to show them that there are lots of other ways of solving problems and the workshop was a success. This kind of psychological and social change doesn’t come overnight. It takes time but we have seen how our children’s behaviour has changed in the space of a year,” concludes Ceren Suntekin.



It is not the centre’s task to take children off the street. This is a far bigger task than the small centre can handle so Ceren Suntekin refers this question to the Turkish state instead.