Obituary

Turkan Saylan
Dermatologist, founder of Turkish Leprosy Relief Association, and women’s rights activist.
Born on Dec 13, 1935, in Istanbul, Turkey, she died of liver cancer on May 18, 2009, in Istanbul, aged 73 years.

“You, my dear daughter”, reads a letter addressed to Turkey’s girls from dermatologist Turkan Saylan, “Stop asking yourself, ‘Why am I born a girl?’ and aim at becoming the best you can be.” The letter, which was read at Saylan’s funeral in Istanbul, conveyed a message close to the heart of this woman whose life was devoted to medicine and social activism.

Saylan was one of the first female dermatologists in Turkey, and a leading figure in the fight against leprosy. In 1976, she founded the country’s Turkish Leprosy Relief Association. Later, she helped found the International Leprosy Union and served as a consultant to WHO on the disease. But she will perhaps be best remembered for her women’s rights activism, and for her efforts to bring education to girls living in the impoverished Turkish countryside.

In 1989, she helped found the Association to Support Contemporary Life (CYDD), a non-governmental organisation (NGO) that works to place young girls in school. CYDD was inspired by the years Saylan spent working in rural Turkey, where girls, for cultural and financial reasons, are often left behind at home when their brothers go to school. CYDD has built schools in rural areas and awarded scholarships to young girls. “The aim of this NGO is to protect and advance Ataturk’s Turkish Republic and secularism”, Filiz Merici, the new head of the organisation, told The Lancet “She [Saylan] thought the only way to make this come alive was to make all children have the same opportunities to have an education.” Despite Saylan’s death, this work will continue. “Of course she is a great loss, not only for CYDD, but also for Turkey and even for the world”, Merici said, “But she has shown us the way to make her dreams come true.”

An uncompromising secularist and a firm believer in the principles of Kemal Ataturk, Saylan’s life was controversial until the end. Along with other members of CYDD, she was recently placed on a watch list compiled by public prosecutors looking into allegations of a planned military coup against the Islamic Justice and Development Government. Weeks before her death, police raided her home and office and confiscated private and professional documents. Condemning the raid on state television, a terminally ill but defiant Saylan said: “We want democracy and contemporary values to rule. Therefore, we are ready to fight for this cause as long as it takes.” She said she favoured neither a coup nor the introduction of Sharia, the Islamic legal code.

People who knew her are full of praise. “Dr Saylan was one of the most active, energetic, positive, humble persons who managed to accomplish lifetimes of work in a single life,” said Filiz Odabas-Geldiay, vice-president of the Ataturk Society of America, an NGO that aims to promote Ataturk’s legacy. Saylan was awarded the organisation’s Ataturk Award in Education and Modernisation in 2001. But Saylan was known as a modest person who disliked all the praise she received. “I very much dislike people who praise me saying ‘if only we had ten more people like you, Turkey would have been so much more advanced by now’.” Saylan told Voice of Ataturk, a publication of the Ataturk Society of America, a few years before her death. “My response to them is why aren’t you one of those people yourself? Stop praising me and be the kind of person you want to see.”

Saylan graduated from the Faculty of Medicine of Istanbul University in 1963 with a specialisation in venereal diseases and dermatology. After further studies in the UK, she taught at Istanbul University, becoming a professor in 1977. She was the head of Istanbul Leprosy Hospital for 21 years between 1981 and 2002, when she retired.

Saylan received several international awards, including the International Gandhi Prize in 1986. She published seven books in Turkey, including the autobiographical The Sun Rises Now Out of Hope. Here, Saylan gives intimate details from her career and private life. It was a spectacular life, but also one plagued by health problems. As a medical student, she spent 13 months lying face down in bed to recover from spinal tuberculosis and she was diagnosed with breast cancer 19 years ago. By 2002, the cancer had spread to her liver.

Saylan is survived by two sons, Cinar Orge, a physician, and Caglayan Orge, a graphic designer, and two grandchildren. She married twice, to Mustafa Orge and Cevdet Bilgin, but remained single for the last years of her life.

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