



HELPING YOUNG WOMEN TO THRIVE

FEATURE: KRISTINA WILFORE. PHOTOGRAPHY: COURTESY OF DLD

*Turkey is the world's 17th largest economy but women account for only 30% of workers here. IWI charities coordinator **Kristina Wilfore** reports on an initiative to support women wanting to enter the workforce*



Women account for only 30% of all workers in Turkey. Turkey may be the 18th largest economy in the world yet there is an unrealised potential with such an incredibly low level of workforce participation by women. Turkey is ranked just 45 out of 48 countries for the percentage of women in high-level corporate positions, below Thailand and above Ukraine. The reasons for the low level of labour participation by women in Turkey are complex. Limited access to education leading to a high illiteracy rate for women is one major barrier – women are five times as likely as men to be illiterate. Cultural conservatism also puts women squarely at work in the home where they are not paid for their labour, have no access to company-provided health care and little, if any, retirement security.

Not only do women in Turkey need access to education in order to have a better chance to enter the workforce, they also need leadership skills and professionalism to be successful. These skills are not often taught inside the university classroom in Turkey. It is with this focus that Sema Başol, an executive with more than 25 years of diverse work experience both in the US and in Turkey, founded the Turkish Women's Initiative and sister organisation DLD (Change Leaders Association), an IWI grantee.

Sema has worked with multi-billion dollar corporations such as Mattel and Koç Holding, as well as with small businesses and non-profit educational and cultural institutions. She first went to the US to take her MBA at UCLA. This was possible as a result of a scholarship she received from the Turkish Education Foundation, one of the top foundations in Turkey that provides financial support to qualifying students.

"My job at Mattel was my first job in the US," she says. "There, I had the opportunity to work in an organisation where women held key executive positions, so I was able to observe first hand women in powerful positions which was a totally new experience for me. From then on I started reading about women leaders trying to understand what it takes to be a leader."

DLD's mission is to strengthen the potential of girls and women to become active, responsible and productive members of society. By doing this, they help advance society's growth and prosperity through the full contributions of women. The current focus is on young women of modest means attending high schools and universities. The women are generally the first in their families to attend university and therefore don't have as many support systems in place to help them thrive.

Launched in 2009, DLD's flagship Sparks Programme is an innovative, eight-month programme that develops leadership skills through active participation in social change projects selected by the girls and women themselves. These projects not only help young women build their skills, but also benefit the participants' communities at the same time. This programme is the first of its kind in Turkey. Groups are conducted in Düzce, İzmit/Gölcük, İzmir, Bolu and İstanbul. After participating, the women are better equipped to succeed in their chosen occupations and to take on leadership roles at work, in the home and in their communities.

The training and leadership curriculum covers a broad range of topics, such as how to network to support each other as women, how to organise a CV, tips on public speaking, and well as addressing the negative role of "gossip" in Turkish society. So far, 170 graduates have completed the programme, organising along the way 25 different social change projects that have collectively touched the lives of over 150,000 people in their communities.



A Sparks group made shopping bags decorated with pictures by children

One Sparks group in Kocaeli/İzmit, for example, made 215 shopping bags decorated with pictures done by kindergarten children, and sold them at a local bazaar to create an awareness in the community on how harmful using nylon bags is for the environment. The programme worked in collaboration with the municipality, which was running a sewing course for women, to have the bags sewn for free. The participants visited the directors of three kindergartens to explain their purpose and explained to the children about the very long recycling time of nylon and the harm it does to the

world's ecological system. In addition to being on local TV and featured in newspaper articles, the programme participants received a prize from the Kocaeli Municipality for making the most useful ecological project in the community.

Another Sparks Group in Düzce conducted a walking course at the university campus and in a park area of town to create awareness for the handicapped, seeing-impaired and people in wheelchairs. They set up a stand and asked people walking by if they would like to experience what it is like to be blind or be on a wheelchair. Then they asked for feedback from the volunteers about their experiences and asked how, during this short time, they could empathise with the handicapped in order to raise community awareness about support systems needed. This group was invited to speak on more than six local TV programmes about better ways to provide basic services to the disabled and better accessibility in the community. They were featured in local newspapers and reached more than 120,000 people in the community through social media.

An Izmir group took photos depicting threats to the livelihoods and wellbeing

of women in Turkey; violence, child brides, education barriers, women seen mainly as sex objects in society, lives of women controlled by men, etc. They were the models for the photos and they devised the scenes depicted themselves. The group found a sponsoring photography company that enlarged the photos to be exhibited in simple frames. They asked the municipality to exhibit these 18 photos in their cultural centre for two weeks. The group even made a small opening reception where each girl explained the visitors the story behind her photo.

The concept of a woman lending a helping hand to other women and people in need, to make communities stronger, is an important principle of the programme. Solidarity among women and the desire to make real change are two of the most important ingredients for helping to create a more level playing field for girls and women in Turkey. "In Silicon Valley, I met women who had decided to make a difference in the world and started their own organisations," says Sema. "This led me to believe that I, too, needed to give back and inspired me to start my own organisation. It was now my turn to do something for girls and women in Turkey."



Sema Başol, Founder of Charity DLD

HOW YOU CAN VOLUNTEER

One of DLD's core values and practices is social and professional networking among participants, facilitators, volunteers and board members, as well as with local product and service providers who donate in-kind resources to DLD.

DLD was chosen as an IWI grantee in part for its openness to collaborating with IWI members to support their programme, for help on projects such as:

- Development of mentoring relationships between Sparks women and seasoned expat professionals
- IWI members providing Sparks students and alumni with access to the much-needed networks for securing internships and jobs
- IWI members tutoring Sparks students in English, one of the most-requested skills (which can be done via Skype)
- IWI members providing training to students and facilitators in specific leadership areas

DLD also needs operational support and is looking for international PR consultants, development and fundraising consultants, Turkish to English translations for its website and bulletins and help with their summit in May 2016 in Izmir. For more information about opportunities and the ways in which you can help, please contact Kristina Wilfore, IWI Charity Coordinator, or our new Charity Volunteer Coordinator, Kristina Delgado, introduced right, at charity@iwi-tr.org,

Meet Kristina Delgado, IWI's new Charity Volunteer Coordinator

Kristina is New York City native and a graduate of the George Washington University, where she received a BA in International Affairs with focuses on Public Health and International Development. Shortly after graduating, she was awarded a J William Fulbright Fellowship to Turkey. She has worked with various non-governmental organisations in the United States, Latin America and the MENA region with projects on gender-based violence, maternal health, women's rights, girls' education and refugee advocacy. She recently served pro bono as the Director of Operations for Small Projects Istanbul.

Through her work in Small Projects Istanbul, she realised the overwhelming demand for volunteer opportunities and the lack of venues to accommodate them in Istanbul. Kristina says: "I am very excited at the potential to build a culture of skill-based volunteerism with foreign women in Istanbul and contribute to community efforts throughout the city, and I look forward to working with IWI's network."