

These “Sparks” first learned how to dream – and then they told their own stories...

“I could not even order water delivery to my home; now I can talk freely with the mayor!”

By Gizem Coskunarda

The Turkish non-profit DLD (Değişim Liderleri Derneği) believes a just and equal world needs more women leaders.

For this reason, DLD developed the “Sparks” program for university women of low and modest means. Its just-published book *Kivircimler* chronicles the lives of some of the participants. Their stories read like screenplays.

The intent of Sema Basol, DLD’s founder, is that the book will indeed be a spark of hope for all women, as well as a model for other women’s programs worldwide.

The book (in Turkish) is now on store shelves in Turkey. Co-authors are Basol and journalist Asli Cakir. It is published by Dogan Kitap.



How is the 8-month program progressing?

- Sparks programs are available at eight universities in various cities throughout Turkey.
- Interested women are interviewed to determine their interest and potential tenacity.
- Six to eight women per group are selected and spend the next eight months collaborating as a team on a social change project of their choosing. They plan, execute and deliver the results of their project, an experience that Sparks graduates routinely claim to be confidence-building and life-changing.
- Sparks groups meet weekly. The women research and consider issues such as gender roles, economic equality and justice, and human rights. Career topics include presentation skills, body language, personal development, resume preparation, and interviewing skills.

- Each group is supported by a professional woman facilitator, who partners with the Sparks throughout the program. Facilitators do not play the role of teacher, trainer, or subject matter expert, but work with the Sparks as companions in learning.
- Meetings also include games and support exercises that help the women learn about themselves and that provide hands-on experience with teamwork and leadership. In this way, they are actively “learning by doing.”

“SPARKS UNEARTH THE INNER YOU”

Nagehan Sumen (21 years old)

“Before Sparks, I used to say, “If I don’t do it, someone else will.”

Now I am used to spending efforts for good deeds. Sparks taught us time management, and I believe that is what helped me research, explore, and take advantage of possibilities out there.

M.D. (23 years old)

I used to herd goats and think about what kind of a woman I would become. After finishing the Sparks program, I also worked as a volunteer for a year. I gave speeches, made presentations, and organized meetings. In my first-ever speech, I said to the audience, “I am in front of you, speaking by myself. This is a revolution for me.” This is probably the biggest contribution of the Sparks program for me: It unearths the inner you.

Bilge Bayrak (27 years old)

I became more aware of what it means to be a woman. This is the best thing I can do for myself and for society.

“MY FATHER SAYS MY FEET ARE MORE FIRMLY TOUCHING THE GROUND.”

- Serife Caginay (22 years old), 4th year law student at Izmir Economics University



Before, I would not even think about wanting to be a judge, but now I have goals and believe in myself

My father says my feet are more firmly touching the ground. He says, “Even if you hit an obstacle, you are strong now, and you will recover quickly.”

People around me notice the differences in me and remark on the positive changes. Now I listen to myself when making decisions. I do not worry about what other people will think.

At our first Sparks meeting, we all shared our goals. Mine was to get married and have four children. After my Sparks year, I now know that I want to be a judge.

“ALL AT ONCE, I HAVE TURNED INTO SOMEONE ELSE. NOW I CAN SPEAK, AND I CAN DO.”

- Ece Naz Morcimen (21 years old), 3rd year student in Ege University, studying to be a midwife



If the answer is “no,” boys are sent to Arabic countries to work, and girls are married off.

If the answer is “yes,” they will continue to high school. If the answer is “no,” boys are sent to Arabic countries to work, and girls are married off.

Before the Sparks program, I could not even call the delivery service to order water for my home. For our Sparks project, I had to talk to mayors.

I improved a lot during the project process. I found myself sending emails to printing presses. When a printing press company did not reply, I found myself getting on the phone and telling them we need to meet up.

All at once, I turned into someone else. Now I can speak, and I can do.

In my village there was a separation of boys and girls, but not in our house. All my father wanted for us girls was to have an education.

In our village after eighth grade, all children are asked, “Are you going to keep on going to school?”

SEMA BASOL – FOUNDER OF DLD

“YOUNG WOMEN NEED GREATER SUPPORT COMPARED TO YOUNG MEN”

The Sparks program is somewhat personal. I want women – especially young women – to be happy. Also, I love spending time with women and young people. Compared to young men, young women need more support.

Women need to have a strong presence in the workplace and in social life. This requires leadership skills and a supportive network. This is what Sparks tries to achieve. In reality, we teach Sparks women to dream, and then how to turn those dreams into reality through “learning by doing.”

I started this journey with the realization that most of our young women, especially those that come from smaller towns, are alone in university. They do not have families with higher academic experience to help support them through this process. The Sparks program has completed its 10th year, and we have reached approximately 400 young women graduates.

There is no other program doing what we do. While there are many entrepreneurship or leadership education programs available, most of these last just a few days. What we do is an eight-month, hands-on experience. Sometimes even eight months is not long enough, and many of our Sparks want to continue for a second year.

What we have observed are the huge sacrifices Turkish families make to ensure a good education for their daughters. We pick up from there. We help Sparks understand their value as women and their ability to contribute to society. The young women we serve create miracles through the transformations they live through.

DLD is completely dependent on donations, all of which directly benefit the program. Therefore, we are constantly searching for financial support. We have a few Turkish organizational sponsors. We manage our funds carefully. The cost for one group of eight young women is \$4,800, inclusive – or a mere \$600 per participant. I am constantly thinking of next steps.



My highest goal is to reach more young women in Turkey, possibly even a program that supports those in their critical early career years.