

çöp(m)adam

Tara Chantal Hopkins & Melih Özsöz, social entrepreneurs, worked at Sabancı University and the founders of "Çöp(m)adam" Balıkesir, Ayvalık based.

Questioning what is worth saving or not, çöp(m)adam started as an experimental project in Ayvalık addressing the issues of women's employment in Turkey and the importance of recycling/re-using. çöp(m)adam aims to utilize waste in a creative, aesthetically and unique way. çöp(m)adam items are produced from the packaging that would be or has been thrown away, by women who have never previously earned a salary. All the products are one-of-a-kind and signed by its producer.

In the ten minutes it takes to read this entry, 5.000.000 tons of waste will be produced worldwide. When it comes to reducing environment impacts, nothing is more important to us than growing and living sustainably with our planet.

"çöp" means "garbage" in Turkish; "madam", the same as the French word indicates. "çöp(m)adam" (Garbage Ladies) is symbolic of this meaning – taking garbage and turning it into something fashionable and fun.

Women who have never worked for salary before are our employees. They transform throw-away material – upcycle, recycle, re-use and so on, into cool and useful items that are sold in our workshop, in boutiques in Turkey, and abroad, or in cooperation with multinational companies.

Acknowledging that there is an awful lot of excess packaging that comes with living in the modern world, and not having the energy to stop that on a mass scale, we decided to lessen the struggle and make something positive out of what could be negative. We use irregular or discontinued packaging from multinational companies, ie, instant soup, salad dressings, ketchup or mayonnaise. We also completely recycle potato chip, cookie and cake packaging! Vinyl banners from advertising, metal bottle caps from various beverages, plastic bags, grain/flour sacks are among the materials we utilise for our products.

çöp(m)adam was started as a limited company in the summer of 2008, with sponsorship from Sabancı University and Unilever. To date, we have worked with more than 400 women. Many women who trained with us have left us to go on to work part or full-time jobs. While we are sorry they are no longer working with us, we are pleased that they gained enough self-confidence and support from their families to do more than what we can offer.

On average, we save at least 6 tons of waste from going to land-fill annually with sales of 4,000 plus items.

çöp(m)adam is a company that has a soul: we are not just selling products, we are doing something that is making a positive change in the world. Our mission is to create high quality fashion without the exploitation of workers and the environment that is too often present in our industry. We set-up our own manufacturing facilities in Ayvalık/Balıkesir and Diyarbakır (in cooperation with **KA-MER**) in Turkey to leverage the artisanal talent embedded within the Turkish culture and to provide opportunities for women in impoverished communities. We care for each and every one of the çöp(m)adams. They are the ones that put their skills and love into making the products. To make a çöp(m)adam bag, it takes from ½ to 5 days.

We are proud to pay fair and meaningful wages, (they are paid per item) not the minimum wages that dominate the industry, while offering our products at reasonable prices. We are proud to offer a clean and safe working environment and a job opportunity that lets mothers spend time with their families.

We offer regular work to around 40 women in Ayvalik, who have a real passion for their work and are highly committed to öp(m)adam. All of our women are working in healthy and hygienic surroundings and are paid a fair wage. The fact that we are in a position to guarantee regular employment means that our women are able to make significant contributions when it comes to providing sustainability for their families and communities.