

# Business

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## Zain Group publishes insightful report on women in technology

### Annual thought leadership report focuses on 'Bridging the Gender Gap in STEM Fields'

KUWAIT: Zain Group, the leading mobile telecom innovator in seven markets across the Middle East and Africa, announced the publication of its annual thought leadership report, this year entitled, Women in Technology - Bridging the Gender Gap in STEM Fields. It provides insights on the gender gap in science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM), highlighting the impact on socio-economic development across the board.

The release of the report, which coincides with International Women's Day, explores several important issues regarding the cause, nature, and effects of the challenges faced by women as related to STEM, and the prejudices they face even upon entering professions related to the subject area. The publication delves into aspects of gender disparity; the gender digital divide; literacy and STEM education; as well as employment equality.

- **Bader Al-Kharafi: The role of women in tech needs to be increased. It is that simple**
- **Released on International Women's Day, report explores important issues regarding the cause, nature, and effects of the challenges faced by women as related to STEM**
- **Report finds that if 600 million more women were connected to the internet over the next three years, global GDP would rise between \$13 billion - \$18 billion**
- **Continually driving equality programs, Zain pushing an agenda that is cohesive, inclusive, and fair to all**
- **Zain tapping into over 100 of its female workforce who were certified in the fundamentals of Data Analytics and Science**

Bader Al-Kharafi, Zain Vice-Chairman and Group CEO commented, "The role of women in tech needs to be increased. It is that simple. Zain is continually driving equality programs, recognizing the need to push an agenda that is cohesive, inclusive, and fair to all. This thought leadership report is another tool to highlight the extent of the exclusion of women from STEM-related fields, and what is needed to close the gender gap across the region and beyond."

Al-Kharafi added, "Since the launch of our Gender Diversity initiative, we have invested in certifying over 100 females within Zain on the fundamentals of Data Analytics and Science. These colleagues then went on

to take part in our groupwide 12-hour datathon in April 2020 at the height of pandemic, and are now part of a talent pool of resources we tap into for tech related projects across our footprint. We will continue to inspire learning through practice, and the engagement in this datathon has proven the resilience of our talented pool of women in STEM."

Jennifer Suleiman, Zain Group's Chief Sustainability Officer said, "Zain has a long list of activities aimed at reducing the gender gap. The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted glaring inequalities across so many aspects of modern life, and the plight of females in STEM-related fields is one of them. The timing and topic of our latest report that coincides with International Women's Day couldn't be more appropriate, and we hope it forces people to recognize the state of play when it comes to gender exclusion and the steps required to rectify it." This latest and insightful thought leadership encompasses issues related to gender biases in STEM; innovation in STEM; developing STEM skills to achieve financial inclusion; and COVID-19 and women in technology. Core areas of discussion and highlights in the report include:

#### Aspects of gender disparity

Women account for half of the world's population and are fundamental to ensuring a sustainable future and peaceful societies. There has been some progress made towards achieving a more equal society, however, there is still a long way to go and according to the UN, the gender gap is considered "the unfinished business of our time."

#### The gender digital divide

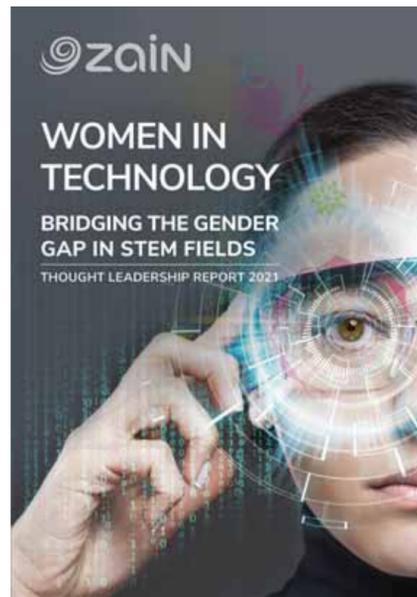
Studies have shown that the gender digital divide is due to the lack of access females have in attaining digital skillsets that can help them advance and develop in the area. Additionally, women are more likely to represent lower income segments, leaving them unable to afford and purchase digital software and hardware.

Glaring discrepancies exist with regards females gaining access to digital tools, including:

- 165 million fewer women own a mobile phone in comparison to men
- Globally, 433 million women are unconnected
- The global internet user gap is 17 percent
- If 600 million more women were connected to the internet over the next three years, global GDP would rise between \$13 billion and \$18 billion

#### Literacy and STEM education

As the number of girls gaining an education increases, disparities associated with access to opportunities, quality and topics they choose to study becomes more evident. It is imperative for girls to further develop themselves in STEM education, as careers in these areas are seen as the jobs of the future, driving innovation, social well-being, inclusive growth, and sustainable development.



Zain Bahrain's Girls for Tech Camp, for example, was launched in partnership with the Kingdom's Supreme Council for Women and Clever Play, an organization that aims to inspire children's curiosity and passion for STEM. Established in October 2019, the program equips girls between ages 8 and 13 years with 10 hours of training in coding, and targets training 1,000 girls. In 2019-2020, 725 girls completed the program.

#### Employment equality

Women are underrepresented in the technology sector and even though large strides have been made in STEM education, it has not translated into employment. Studies have shown that even though countries have largely invested in improving girls' education including STEM education, cultural and societal constraints have hindered this needed transition, impacting societies in a dramatic manner. This gap in STEM employment prevents economies from reaching their full potential as it omits half of the population's potential and talent to contribute to the economy.

#### Gender biases in STEM

Gender stereotypes in the context of STEM start at an early age and continue to impact children at later stages in their lives. It has been studied that children's choices to enter STEM start as early as 3-5 years of age. By the ages of 6-10 years, girls start developing the notion that boys are better in math, which is not the case, as analyses show girls and boys in fact perform

the same. Another stereotype that starts to emerge during this time is that males innately succeed in the field of STEM. These stereotypes continue to manifest throughout the course of women's education and career.

#### Innovation in STEM

STEM plays a key role in creating innovative tools to address global challenges that our world faces. It has been proven that diversity in teams drives transformation as it brings about new ideas and perspectives. As men and women have different life experiences that lead to varied perspectives, such diversity in viewpoints triggers creativity and improves results. Merging STEM and diversity creates phenomenal growth opportunities.

#### Developing STEM skills to achieve financial inclusion

Technology and digital services are seen as tools that can be used to enable development. When used to progress development, technology can be extremely transformational and improve social and economic outcomes. Such tools could also be used to improve distribution in addition to promoting inclusivity, increasing accessibility and allocating resources. With that being said, it is important for marginalized and disadvantaged segments to leverage tools that help elevate their standards of living and increase their access to services.

#### COVID-19 and women in technology

A needs assessment conducted by UN agencies highlighted that households led by males had less access to the internet than those led by males during these times of COVID-19. In addition, only 41% of women-led households claimed that their children had access to online websites created by ministries of education that supported the continuation of learning in comparison to 56 percent of male-led households.

In addition to learning inequalities, the increase of violence during lockdowns is extremely alarming as females are left vulnerable to dire situations. Digital advancements such as instant messaging with geolocation functions, domestic abuse hotlines, and disguised apps that provide discreet information for survivors in case their abusers continue to track them, can play a pivotal role in saving the lives of women.

#### 'Choose To Challenge' is this year's theme for International Women's Day

Marked annually on March 8th, International Women's Day (IWD) is a global day celebrating the social, economic, cultural and political achievements of women. The day also marks a call to action for accelerating gender parity. The campaign theme for International Women's Day 2021 is 'Choose To Challenge'. A challenged world is an alert world. And from challenge comes change. So let's all #ChooseToChallenge.



Controversy surrounding the importation of Indonesian palm oil and its sustainability fuelled enough concern in Switzerland to trigger a public vote on the agreement.

## Swiss approve Indonesia free trade deal

GENEVA: Swiss voters narrowly backed a free trade deal signed with Indonesia, opening up a vast potential market with the world's fourth most populous country.

Controversy surrounding the importation of Indonesian palm oil and its sustainability fuelled enough concern in Switzerland to trigger a public vote on the agreement. But the deal scraped through the public approval test with 51.7 percent of the vote, on a 51 percent turnout. Supporters voiced relief at the result but said they would have to be more sensitive to environmental issues in any future votes on trade agreements. Under the deal, tariffs will be gradually removed from almost all of Switzerland's biggest exports to Indonesia, while the Swiss will abolish duties on Indonesian industrial products.

Anyone importing Indonesian palm oil must prove that it meets certain environmental and social standards. The agreement was signed in 2018 and

approved by the Swiss parliament in 2019, but opponents were especially critical of Bern's move to reduce palm oil import duties and secured a public vote on the deal. Palm oil is a key ingredient in a wide range of products from food to cosmetics, but it has long been controversial. Environmentalists say it drives deforestation, with huge swathes of rainforest logged in recent decades to make way for plantations.

#### Bears, tigers and orangutans

The deal contains exceptions for agricultural products, notably to protect Switzerland's sunflower and rapeseed oil production. For palm oil, customs duties will not be removed but instead reduced by between 20 and 40 percent, on a volume limited to 12,500 tons per year. Campaign posters backing the deal showed a Swiss bear hugging an Indonesian tiger to symbolize the partnership, while those against showed an orangutan and baby clinging to a tree trunk, surrounded by flames. The agreement aims to boost ties with Indonesia, which despite its population is only Switzerland's 44th biggest economic partner and 16th biggest export market in Asia.

In 2020, Swiss exports to Indonesia amounted to just 498 million Swiss francs (\$540 million, 450 million euros). Switzerland is an export-led economy, drawing almost half its national income from abroad.—AFP

## Markets look to ECB for reassurance on cheap money

FRANKFURT: The European Central Bank is on Thursday expected to stress its commitment to keeping borrowing costs low, as inflation concerns and a slow vaccination drive weigh on the eurozone economy. This week's meeting of the ECB's 25-member governing council is likely to be dominated by a recent rise in global bond yields, triggered by signs of higher inflation on the horizon.

Investors fear faster price growth could force a hike in interest rates that would make borrowing more expensive and slow the recovery from the pandemic.

"ECB President Christine Lagarde will have to convince markets that the central bank remains strongly committed to securing favorable financing conditions," Unicredit bank said in an analyst note.

The Frankfurt institution is also expected to nudge down its 2021 forecast for economic growth in Thursday's latest quarterly projections. Many curbs on public life remain in place as the euro area struggles to bring down coronavirus infections, while the pace of vaccinations lags behind countries like the United States or Britain. To boost growth and drive up anemic inflation, the ECB has long held interest rates at historically low and even negative levels, alongside offering ultra-cheap loans to banks. It responded to the coronavirus shock by launching a 1.85 trillion euro (\$2.2 trillion) pandemic emergency bond-buying program (PEPP), on top of an existing asset purchasing scheme running at 20 billion euros a month.

The massive debt purchases are aimed at keeping credit flowing in the 19-nation currency club to encourage spending and investment.

#### Talk over action

"With no prospect of any change to its policy settings, the focus will be on the bank's efforts to explain how and when it would step up bond purchases in response to rising bond yields," said Andrew Kenningham, an economist at Capital Economics. Some observers expect the ECB to step up the pace of PEPP purchases or extend the scheme beyond March



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2022, while others think the bank might settle for saying it is "monitoring" the yield situation. European bond yields haven't seen quite the same surge as US Treasury notes, which reflects optimism about the US economy as well as jitters over higher inflation from Washington's \$1.9 trillion stimulus plan. Nevertheless, Germany's benchmark 10-year bond yield has risen by 0.31 percent since the start of the year. French 10-year bond yields have climbed 0.32 percent and Italy's by 0.24 percent, said Eric Dor of France's IESEG business school. Yields are closely watched because they serve as a guide for bank lending rates, and the ECB is eager to avoid a premature end to easy money before the Covid recovery has taken hold.

#### 'Blind eye'

The ECB has repeatedly stressed it plans to stick to its ultra-loose monetary policy for "as long as necessary" and use "all of its instruments" to reach its inflation goal of just under 2.0 percent. Eurozone inflation stood at 0.9 percent in January and February, a big jump after several months of negative inflation last year as COVID shutdowns sapped consumer demand. A series of one-off effects is expected to see consumer prices climb further this year and perhaps even overshoot the target, complicating the ECB's job. Price growth driven by Germany's reversal of a sales tax cut or temporary mark-ups when businesses like hairdressers first reopen do not represent the inflation the ECB wants, said ING bank economists.—AFP