

1. Heather Best, 33, Canadian, Middle East service manager @AVI-SPL (computers & tech) 2. Jessica Prella, 34, German, manager @ Girl's and Women's Football, IFA (sports) 3. Serena Abi Aad, 33, Lebanese, self-employed filmmaker (TV & film) 4. Aya Samaha, 27, Palestinian-Jordanian, Head of Digital @ Meet Geeks (computers & tech) 5. Filippa Guarna, 37, Australian, motorsport media manager @ Driven Productions (motorsport) 6. Sarah Al-Hajali, 36, Swedish-Palestinian-Romanian, CEO @ CryoSave Arabia (genetics & medical research) 7. Lesia Kuzmenko, 24, Ukrainian, Mixologist @ Toro + Ko (bartending) 8. Niranjana Sreekumar, 25, Indian, Sales Engineer @Enerwhere (electrical engineering) 9. Sharon Jutla, 38, English, owner @ Sharon Jutla Interiors (architecture & construction) 10. Tamara Clarke, 37, American, technology journalist and blogger @ Entrepreneur magazine (tech) 11. Aimee Homer, 32, English, Investment Banker @ Investbridge Capital (banking & finance)

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Anything men can do, we can do better

The Middle East's highest achievers in male-dominated fields show us what women can do better than the boys...

It's 2017. All your misconceptions about women and men are out and a new era is in: one of female scientists, tech geniuses, venture capitalists and bad bosses.

But wait – hasn't that era been here since the 1980s? So why are women in these fields still viewed as an anomaly, rather than the norm? *La Femme* explores...

Google was at the centre of a social media furore back in August – but not for a good reason. One of the tech giant's computer engineers released an internal memo asserting that men are more successful in tech roles due to biological differences such as “men's higher drive for status” and that women “are more prone to anxiety”, making them less competent in tech or science-based roles. He said this in 2017. He's American, a Harvard graduate and works in one of the most progressive companies in the world. And what became very clear after watching the social media waves afterward, is that many people, women included, shared this view: that women are biologically not as suited to more 'brainy' or 'tough' roles.

That begs the question: how many Marie Curies, Hedy Lamarrs, Amelia Earharts, Ada Lovelaces (the woman who created the world's first computer algorithm), Mae C. Jemisons, Sheryl Sandbergs, Susan Wojcickis and Evelyn Boyd Granvilles do we have to see before we change our narrative, both internally and socially? ▶



WE CAN DO BETTER
According to a report last year from the World Bank, 13 of the 15 countries with the lowest rates of women in the workforce are in the MENA region, including Lebanon, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Iran, Oman and Jordan.



The View

► Sadly, the number of women in tech has declined steadily since 2000, according to a report by the American Association of University Women – the computer sciences are just not attracting as many women. And why is that? Some studies, like one by the University of Washington, point to a “masculine culture” that makes women feel as if they don’t belong, or to gender stereotypes of “women can’t do *insert whatever field men want to feel superior about*.” The American Psychological Association has conducted several studies regarding gender inequality; in particular, one which showed a strong correlation between countries with better gender equality and better performance of young females in mathematics. So what are we going to do about it?

La Femme spoke to some of the Middle East’s high achievers in male-dominated roles, to get their view on being members of the “boy’s club” and to see what we can do better.

CEOs of creative tech agency YERV, Eriko Varkey and Yamine Rasool, have been busy making international headlines the past year with their mobile app development, which has caught attention from New York to Dubai to Tokyo. The two powerhouses have developed some of the region’s best-selling apps, such as Halla Walla.

Japanese native Eriko is frank: “We’re super proud to be running a tech company as women, because the tech industry has been known to be quite male-dominated, with women only holding 24% of tech jobs, according to a recent study by Forbes,” she says.

But that stat isn’t getting her or her partner, Bahraini native Yasmine, down – if the big boys don’t want to play by the rules, the tech gurus says, go around ‘em.

“Try not to let the gender unbalance upset you too much,” says Yasmine. “Take that passion and put it right back into to fighting to get what you want.”

Eriko agrees: “As long as educated women continue striving to be the best in their fields, there will be no choice but to close the gap,” she says with determination.

“And if that doesn’t work,” she adds, “do what we did and start your own company!”

And that’s just what three of our interviewees did – as any businessperson does, they first recognised a gap in the market. Then, they filled it, creatively and competitively. This means they’re their own boss, and can also employ other women, creating more opportunity and a level playing field.

Sarah, born and raised in Sweden, the country in the world with the least disparity in opportunity and wages between women and men, didn’t think twice about setting up her own firm, CryoSave, which is a storage service and facility for stem cells – mainly because she knew she was the man for the job, as it were.

“I’ve always been a huge advocate for the inclusion of women in male-dominated fields such as engineering,” she explains. “There’s nothing inherently male about engineering, so young girls need to see more women role models to give them the belief that they can make it too.”

Early on, Sarah made the choice to focus on helping make her field more diverse, and now, she says, “I’m privileged to be working with a team of highly-qualified women who comprise 85% of our workforce in non-support roles in my company.”

British architect and interior designer Sharon also founded her own company, Sharon Jutla Interiors, which employs three female designers.

“The UK is very conservative, and the practices I worked at were always male at the top,” she says. “I watched younger women being pushed into more drafting or landscape, while men seemed to think they were better at designing the actual building structure.”

For Sharon, as with most of the women we spoke to, being taken seriously by clients, peers and other professionals such as subcontractors, was a huge part of their initial struggle, and is still a common hurdle they routinely face. ►

“When WOMEN are mentioned *in the media*, they tend to be described *by their appearance*, rather than their ACHIEVEMENTS.”

- SARAH AL-HAJALI



LESIA KUZMENKO



HEATHER BEST

“Being able to help PAVE THE WAY by chipping away at gender roles couldn’t *make me prouder* to be involved in my industry.”

-HEATHER BEST

The View

“As my career developed I would ask for WHAT I DESERVE, and would often face social pushback and being viewed as *bossy or aggressive* for simply asking. We expect men to be assertive and lobby for more. But [we expect] women to be COMMUNAL AND NURTURING, so when a woman advocates for herself, people often *see her unfavourably*.”

—SHARON JUTLA

SHARON JUTLA

“We don’t need SPECIAL TREATMENT;
we just need a *level playing field*.”

- AIMEE HOMER



FILIPPA GUARINA

UAE VIEW

According to the Ministry of Economy, women account for 60% of the workforce in the UAE, which is pretty high for any region. The ministry is known for its work in promoting Emirati women to enter and rise through the workforce.

AYA SAMAHA



TAMARA CLARKE

“We as women have A DUTY to change our mindsets toward equality and *stop allowing* ourselves to accept less, to settle for less. Until *we realise* that we deserve more, we will keep getting less than WE DESERVE.”

- AYA SAMAHA

► Sharon, a very petite woman, is practical and wry as she describes situations she faced because of her gender and height: “Every new job site means a contractor who will assume I’m the assistant. It usually isn’t until the third meeting that the project team begins looking to me for answers to architectural problems. Many times, subcontractors [on the project] seem very surprised when I give them practical construction solutions to problems they’re facing.”

For Heather, one of approximately 10 female software experts in a company of about 1700, echoes Sharon’s experience – not in her home country of Canada, but with clients in the Middle East.

“I typically do find that I need to prove myself more often to clients. If I attend a site, it’s because the teams on site couldn’t solve the issue, so I’m called out as the last line of defence. When I arrive at site, almost every time, the clients are a bit thrown off by a woman showing up to fix equipment or broken code,” she explains.

Filmmaker Serena Abi Aad agrees: “When I’m on set in Western countries, no one looks twice at me. In the Middle East, however, I’ll still get the occasional double-take or hear a challenging comment from certain male counterparts. But usually everyone is welcoming.”

Football fanatic Jessica, who lives her life on the pitch, has had the same experience, saying, “I’ve earned a lot of respect being in Dubai a long time, but it does still happen that I go to meetings and conferences and am almost completely ignored when it comes to greetings or the introductions.”

Most of the women we spoke to handle the inappropriate restrictions, comments and prejudices levelled against them in the same exact way: they hustle harder, work smarter and produce better results – they take the ‘you do X like a girl’ insult and turn it on its head, showing that ‘doing it like a girl’ means doing something well.

Our motorsport expert, Filipa, illustrates this with one story in particular that proves her boss power...

“A group of us journalists were invited to an event, and I was just a timekeeper,” she says. “They were all trying to beat each other around various driving courses. During the lunch break, I jumped in a car without them knowing, and clocked the fourth fastest time out of the 12 of us there!” she laughs. “It’s things like this that mean the sport has changed in the last five to 10 years, directly because women are becoming involved in the sport: as engineers... or the racing drivers themselves.”

While Filipa is actively closing the gender gap in motorsports, when it comes to the issue in STEM subjects, most of the women we interviewed agreed that representation is key – if we don’t see in our societies that ‘women can do X’, women are, understandably, less likely to see X as a possible career avenue.

“The reason there aren’t more women computer scientists is because there aren’t more women computer scientists,” Jocelyn Goldfein, former director of engineering at Facebook and VP of engineering at VMWare, once said.

Popular biographer and journalist Walter Isaacson explains it like this: “When women have been written out of the history, [girls then]

don’t have great role models. But when you learn about the women who programmed ENIAC or about Grace Hopper or Ada Lovelace... it happened to my daughter,” he says. “She read about all these people when she was in high school, and she became a math and computer science geek.”

Aimee, the MD of an investment banking firm, says that representation was a big part of her career path. When she studied biochemical engineering at university, two of her professors were female powerhouses, one of which is now deputy head of the entire department.

“Both of these women inspired me greatly, as there they were in this male-dominated field ►

The View



JESSICA PRELLIE

“When women have been WRITTEN OUT of the history, girls then don’t have any *role models*.”

- WALTER ISAACSON



NIRANJANA SREEKUMAR

► — they were centre stage and just killing it!” she says proudly.
 For the Millennials we interviewed, the working world was a very different place than for the rest of the interviewees, all in their mid-to-late 30s.
 Niranjana, an electrical engineer, reports both pay similar to that of her male colleagues, and the personal experience of knowing a lot of female engineers who have great positions in reputable companies, and she doesn’t view her engineering role as an anomaly.
 “I’ve heard of a time when the STEM fields were considered unsuitable for women, so I definitely feel proud of being where I’m at in my career today, and have looked up to many of my fellow women working in our sector,” she says.
 Aya Samaha, already the head of digital at her tech firm at the young age of 27, was immersed in tech since she was a little girl.
 “My brother gave me a University-level book on how computers work when I was nine, and it became my new obsession. I learned several programming languages and became a certified Microsoft developer,” she grins.

When it comes to hurdles such as being paid less because she’s an Arab female, the feisty Jordanian says, “I personally don’t put up with it — I refuse to allow hurdles that have to do with me being a woman slow me down.” We *love* that attitude!

And let’s not forget that tech is only one arena where women are underrepresented. Our mixologist, Lesia, is from Ukraine, which she considers liberal when it comes to men and women in similar roles.

“Hospitality has a good mix of ladies and gents. But behind the bar is different — I’d say there are only about 10% of women in mixology in my experience, as women seem to be less interested in my job,” she explains.

While occasionally she sometimes has the experience of male guests perceiving her as “just a pretty face behind the bar”, the young Millennial simply views this as an opportunity to show off her knowledge.

“I love breaking this stereotype and witnessing the surprise on their face after they taste my drinks!” she smiles. “People just need to tell me their preferences and literally, in a couple of minutes, I’ll come up with a perfect drink for them.”

No matter their country of origin, age or the field they work in, every boss we interviewed said that we still have a lot of work to do to improve gender gaps and to challenge perceptions of “male” and “female” jobs.

“Getting your foot in the door is only half the battle,” says technology journalist Tamara. “Fewer women than men make it into senior management [in many sectors], and studies show that women still earn less than men doing the same job.”

The answer? Get ‘em while they’re young.

“The curriculum for early years education needs to become more inclusive for girls across STEM subjects,” Tamara continues. “The possibility of entering male-dominated fields is introduced too late in the academic journey for girls and should start from the beginning.”

Jessica agrees: “Before I started, the girls’ programme was minimal. By hiring a female to build this up, these events really have a chance. It’s about being a role model for the younger player — showing them that there are successful females within the football sector.”

For Filippa, the experience — and motivation — are the same: “Sometimes I’ve felt like a lone wolf, but I hope that my successes are something that other women in car racing will be motivated by.”

Sarah believes the media also has a role to play, saying, “We also need more equal representation in the media of women in these fields. Young girls need to see more women role models in engineering to help them believe that they can make it too.”

If you’re a mother raising young women, or a young woman yourself, perhaps it’s time to explore more avenues than the ‘traditional’ female roles — what’s stopping you?

You could be the next boss that we feature! ■



ERIKO VARKEY AND YAMINE RASOOL