

'Girls Got IT' makes technology and science more accessible

Samar Kadi

Beirut

“If boys can do it, girls can do it, too,” said Asmahan Zein, president of the Lebanese League of Women in Business (LLWB), the organisation behind the innovative Girls Got Information Technology (GGIT) programme.

Zein is adamant that women can excel in information technology (IT) and STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) fields if given the right guidance and proper resources.

“Working women is the name of the game worldwide. Through GGIT, we wanted to reach the girls in tenth and 11th grades to introduce them to future STEM skills that are highly in demand in the workplaces,” she said.

Girls Got IT, an initiative led by LLWB, includes four other Lebanese NGOs involved in promoting digital literacy and empowering women in sciences: Arab Women in Computing (ArabWIC), Women in Technology (WIT), Women in Engineering (WIE) and Digital Opportunity Trust (DOT).

In addition to exposing girls to essential technology skills, GGIT aims to break the cultural stereotypes of women in STEM.

“The percentage of girls who go into IT and STEM fields is only 13%,” Zein said, “so we sought to encourage them to select these fields through hands-on workshops, targeting a specific age group (15-17). When they start to think about what future career

they want and which universities and schools they need to enroll in.”

Workshops are customised to address the needs of women in each region, Zein explained. “For instance, in the (underdeveloped) rural Bekaa region, topics may cover issues such as how to set up a company, how to seek finance, how to use banking and in certain cases, if there is a need for it, we teach them how to use a computer and how to write business letters or official e-mails, etc.,” she said.

The initiative began in 2016 and attracted more than 400 students from private and public schools in the first edition. That success drew in support from UNICEF through its youth innovation labs programme. Ensuing editions have been fully sponsored by the UN agency.

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Four GGIT events have been conducted in Beirut and Mount Lebanon, as well as the Bekaa, Tripoli and Akkar regions of Lebanon, mainly targeting girls from disadvantaged and poor communities.

“By us going to them, we are giving a unique opportunity to the girls, who probably have not stepped out of their region and their community, to increase their



Essential skills. Girls participating in one of GGIT's workshops.

(LLWB)

knowledge,” said GGIT Programme Director Grace Harb.

“At the same time, we are raising awareness about STEM fields and giving [the girls] the chance to explore them.”

Workshops at the one-day GGIT events are conducted by volunteers from NGOs and partner organisations. They cover topics such as coding, robotics, gaming, graphic design, architecture, engineering, programming, website development, bridge construction, hardware design, 3D printing, video editing, hands-on object construction using technology, urban planning and software application.

“Some 22 workshops are offered per event, each lasting four to five hours. Girls choose among them what best suits their interests and taste,” Harb said.

“The first part of the workshop is about theory and then they have to work and produce something. At

the end of the day, they will come out of the workshop with a product in their hand, such as robots, or a programme or a design. We give them the basics of everything, so they can have a taste of the industry.”

The girls hear from “inspirational speakers” from different professional backgrounds who share their stories and serve as role models. They also can network with and select mentors from the membership of the five organisers.

“It is about giving them a push to go into IT and STEM fields,” Harb said, noting that more than 3,000 girls have participated in GGIT events in various Lebanese regions. The next session is scheduled for November in southern Lebanon.

The programme is offered to Syrian refugee girls as well. Workshops are customised, taking into consideration levels of digital literacy and English proficiency.

“They (Syrian refugees) are here for some time and we need to give them a fair opportunity to learn,” Harb contended.

The Girls Got IT programme is involved in the start-up ecosystem in disadvantaged areas, including Akkar and Tripoli in northern Lebanon, said Zein, whose LLWB, an apolitical and non-religious association, groups 270 professional women, including entrepreneurs, lawyers, doctors, engineers and bankers. “We reinforce the girls’ personality and increase their knowledge to seek higher and better positions; to climb the ladder,” she said.

The GGIT programme encourages girls to test their capabilities in IT and STEM subjects. “I thought only men could learn robotics,” said one GGIT participant. “Now I am able to construct a robot!”

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Clear progress in empowering Emirati women

The United Arab Emirates wants equality between the sexes and it is doing what should be done to measure success: It is keeping score.

Real change doesn't come about because of meetings, speeches or laws; it happens because companies and individuals are given targets and told they will be held to a higher standard.

The UAE isn't just saying all the right things when it comes to improving the role of women in society, it is backing its words with actions.

Ten days after the UAE celebrated its third Emirati Women's Day in late August, the Dubai Foundation for Women and Children put on a ten-day exhibition, titled “Seasons of Change,” of paintings by women who have survived sexual abuse, domestic violence or human trafficking. The 10-year-old, non-profit facility provides shelter to women of all nationalities who have been subjected to such human rights violations.

In February 2015, the UAE created the Gender Balance Council to help empower Emirati women.

In February 2017, the council announced its Gender Balance Guide – the first of its kind in the region – which was developed in collaboration with the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). The Emirati news agency WAM

reported: “The guide provides benchmarks and concrete steps to balance genders in workplaces among decision-making positions, promote women-friendly working environments and instil gender balance within the policy framework.”

Scorecards are to be kept and, as a result, companies would be rewarded for meeting criteria to ensure equality between men and women. WAM said gender-balance progress would be measured through a number of national indicators, including the Social Cohesion Index and the Happiness Index.

Even before the council and the guide, the UAE had already done much to empower women:

In September 2008, the UAE appointed the country's first women as ambassadors: Hissa al-Otaiba to Spain and Sheikha Najla al-Qassimi to Sweden.

That same year, women began being trained as part of the VIP Protection Unit at Dubai Police. Today, there are more than 40 highly trained women who specialise in protecting key officials.

The country's ambassador and permanent representative to the United Nations is Lana Nusseibeh, who was appointed to the post in September 2013.

On September 2014, Yousef al-Otaiba, the UAE's ambassador to the United States, said that Major Mariam al-Mansouri, the country's first female fighter pilot, had led air strikes against

the Islamic State (ISIS). “She is a fully qualified, highly trained, combat-ready pilot and she is on a mission,” Otaiba said on MSNBC.

That same month, the UAE opened the region's first military college for women, Khawla bint Al Azwar Military School, from which Abu Dhabi Crown Prince Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed al-Nahyan's daughter graduated in August 2016.

The literacy rate in the UAE is higher among women (95.8%) than men (93.1%), 2015 figures from the UNESCO Institute for Statistics indicated. (The global average for women is 82.7%.)

More than 70 of the 330 candidates in the 2015 Federal National Council elections were women; the consultative body is led by a woman, Noura bint Mohammed al-Kaabi; eight federal cabinet ministers are women; close to 70% of government positions are held by women.

In February 2016, the UAE named Ohood bint Khalfan al-Roumi to the position with – arguably – the highest public profile for any political appointee: minister of state for happiness.

In July 2017, Foreign Minister Sheikh Abdullah bin Zayed al-Nahyan's daughter graduated from her military summer session. Sheikha Fatima bint Abdullah bin Zayed said her father was fully supportive of her decision to enroll. “He told me it is the duty of every citizen to love

their nation and their wise leadership,” she said, as reported by WAM.

In the United States, women account for 55% of undergraduates at four-year colleges. Emirati women make up about 70% of all university graduates in the UAE.

“Under the Constitution, women enjoy the same legal status, claim to titles, access to education, the right to practise professions, and the right to inherit property as men,” the website for the UAE Embassy in Washington stated. “Women are also guaranteed the same access to employment, health and family welfare facilities.”

Mari Kiviniemi, deputy secretary-general of the OECD and a former prime minister of Finland, said at the launch of the Gender Balance Guide that the guide “lays out the road map for the UAE and its organisations to harness the untapped potential that women represent.”

And there is considerable potential.

In July, Sheikha Lubna bint Khalid al-Qasimi, minister of state for tolerance, said women are a powerful economic entity because more than 23,000 businesswomen hold a collective investment exceeding \$10 billion in the country.

The UAE sees the value in empowering women. If societies are to grow, then women must be treated the same as men. The UAE recognises this and is now keeping score.

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