



Bulgarian Centre for Women in Technology:

Initiatives to promote women in ICT, entrepreneurship and science

Bulgaria 2013 – ongoing

Supporting work–life balance and addressing women’s underrepresentation in the labor market: approaches and good practices in the ICT sector

Summary

The Bulgarian Centre for Women in Technology (BCWT) inspires, motivates and supports girls and women in Bulgaria to find their place in the digital world. It works to support women’s leadership and increase women’s professional participation in the digital industry, science and entrepreneurship.

BCWT initiates networking and cooperates with IT businesses, business incubators and NGOs in the implementation of regional innovative projects. It also organises thematic training sessions and events, and stimulates research collaboration, exchange of good practices and resource mobilisation in the ICT sector.

The idea behind the initiative is to contribute to a much-needed change of mindset and improve national environment to encourage women choose ICT and develop a career in the sector. When BCWT’s initiatives started, it was obvious that women in ICT in Bulgaria lacked self-esteem and often had internal psychological barriers. Women often lack motivation to self-promote and draw attention to their own achievements, and they are reluctant to compete for professional recognition. These barriers often mean that girls who have studied IT and mathematics do not search for jobs in the sector and lose opportunities for career development, and that women already employed in IT do not develop professionally at the same pace as men.

1. Country information — policy in context

Ten years after Bulgaria’s entry into the EU, the software industry has firmly established its place in the Bulgarian economy and continues on a path of stable development. If the pace of revenue growth remains unchanged, ICT will be contributing 4.5% of the country’s GDP by 2021, ranking the industry among the largest in the country. Currently, almost 20,000 people in Bulgaria work in ICT, compared with 5,000 in 2016 — 300% growth in less than two years! (Data come from independent consultants CBN Pannoff, Stoytcheff & Co, who have been analysing ICT markets and businesses in Bulgaria for 26 years.)

Over 90% of employees in the sector are young professionals under 35 years of age, and a third of IT specialists are women. The sector employs some of the most highly skilled and well-paid professionals in Bulgaria.

Across Eastern Europe, it is far from unusual for women to work in technology, and Bulgaria has the highest proportion of women in the tech workforce, with 27.7% in 2015, according to the latest EU (Eurostat) data. The high numbers of women working in ICT in Bulgaria may be explained by the long-standing tradition in Bulgaria of women studying engineering and progressing in technical professions.



Interviews held around the chosen practices described below suggested that some of the problems currently faced by women include lack of awareness about their own competences, problems with communication and collaboration in predominantly male teams, and low levels of motivation among women to self-promote and draw attention to their own achievements.

Most of the women with children continue to take all or the largest share of responsibility for childcare. In some working environments, women are even stigmatised and exposed to aggressive behaviours from colleagues and employers, are not promoted and rarely dare to compete for managing positions. The ICT sector is offering fewer opportunities to women for fast and easy career development, compared with some other sectors such as finance and insurance. Unfortunately, these observations do not come from any specific nationwide studies; no substantial research has been carried out recently on gender issues in the tech sector in Bulgaria.

Some NGOs and ICT companies in Bulgaria have combined their efforts to overcome gender stereotypes and attract more talented women into ICT, and some of their results point to improvements in the internal and external environments.

The practices take two main approaches. On one hand, a process of self-organizing of women in ICT was identified at company level that led to raised awareness on gender issues within the companies and was followed by measures of support provided by the employer. This approach has progressed due, to some extent, to global gender equality policies developed at the headquarters of European companies based in countries where there is more mature gender-equality legislation relevant to business.

The other approach identified in Bulgaria to empower and motivate girls and young women via a series of initiatives — school campaigns, promotional and networking events, regional projects, themed training sessions and competitions for female entrepreneurs, which were organized mainly by NGOs with the support and cooperation of IT businesses and the media.

2. Boosting the number of women in ICT: good practice

Since 2012, Bulgarian Center for Women in Technology (BCWT) has been working to challenge gender stereotypes and motivate women in Bulgaria to take up a career in the IT sector. These are some of the most notable initiatives.

1. *Enterpregirl V.1. to V.4* is a competition for young women aged 16 to 25 that was inspired by the Digital Woman of Europe Award in 2013. The prize was awarded by the European Commission at the 2013 ICT Forum – Digital Agenda for Europe to Sasha Bezuhanova, founder and chair of the board of the of European Centre for Women in Technologies, the BCWT and former General Manager and Director of Public Sector for the World Growth Markets (last position) at Hewlett-Packard, Bulgaria.

The objective of *Enterpregirl*, which was organised into four editions over as many years, is to motivate more girls to choose a career in business and ICT, breaking the stereotype that these are male-only sectors. In an effort to develop entrepreneurship skills and opportunities among young women, the initiative invited more than 200 girls throughout the country to present their innovative projects, and experience being change-makers. The competition targets girls and young women who have not yet made the most important decisions about their personal life and professional development, and are more able to consider their options free from family responsibilities. The *Enterpregirl* approach is to influence participants' perceptions in order to overcome gender stereotypes.

2. *Move It Forward Sofia* with and for Roma women regularly holds a female digital starters weekend that brings girls and women together to develop digital projects with and for Roma women. The initiative is



part of the *DLInQube* female digital accelerator network and expert ecosystem, which promotes women-led, digitally driven, digitally enabled enterprises across Europe. It is supported by leading tech companies, women's networks and communities, and the digital start-up ecosystem in Bulgaria. Its objective is to give beginner-level girls and women the skills to drive positive social change and enable them to become digital entrepreneurs and leaders.

3. *Breakfast Club* is series of monthly networking and educational events that address everyday challenges faced by women. The Breakfast Club aims to create a safe environment for open discussions between participants and professionals on possible solutions and further steps for cooperation between different stakeholders. The events are organised at the BCWT offices in Sofia. Topics discussed to date include: what it is to be a woman in a male-dominated sector; challenges around maternity leave and the return to work; digital enlighteners; the role of women's organizations for empowerment of women; and female founders of successful start-ups.

4. *She is Me* gives a new format to a series of established evening events. It was created by BCWT to celebrate the fifth anniversary of its foundation. She is Me takes the form of a series of events that also address current challenges faced by women. It aims to create an environment in which, through the examples of successful women role-models, women can motivate others who lack belief that they too can be successful. The strategic aim of She is Me is to highlight women's roles in technology, entrepreneurship and science. Women who have proven themselves in these sectors, are showcased as role-models for success and influence. During the events, the audience has the opportunity to better understand how individuals are able to overcome certain challenges — especially those usually not encountered by men — and meet others like themselves who want to achieve personal growth and development.

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Further information :

<http://bcwt.bg>

<http://entregirlbg.com>

Move It Forward Sofia with Roma Women: <http://bcwt.bg/en/move-it-forward-sofia-женски-дигитален-уикенд-за-начин/>

Breakfast Club: www.facebook.com/BCWTBreakFastClub/

She is Me: www.facebook.com/SheisMeBCWT/

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