



Maha (front row in hijab) poses with her Migrant Application Team at the International Organization for Migration, Manila Administrative Centre, the Philippines.

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## Motivating women to thrive in a male-dominated tech industry

For girls and young women to thrive in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) careers, they need safe and reliable access to the internet and digital tools. On this year's International Girls in Information and Communications Technology (ICT) Day, meet Maha Sharbek, UN Volunteer Software Engineer with the International Organization for Migration (IOM). Maha is working to advance the access of women, girls and marginalized groups in the ICT sector.

Growing up in Homs, Syria, Maha was always interested in technology, analyzing and solving problems, and she dreamt of becoming a software engineer one day.

"I started studying for a degree in Software Engineering. However, during my second year at the university, the Syrian crisis broke out, where I started volunteering as a first aider with the Syrian Arab Red Crescent to nurse

victims," recalls Maha.

Not very long after, she was forcibly displaced, like many of her colleagues who had to leave the country. Challenges continued to mount, as extremely limited resources were available and security risks caused by the conflict continued to increase.

Despite everything, Maha eventually managed to complete her degree in Software Engineering. Since then, she has been empowering young girls and youth, teaching them computer basics, algorithms and programming, as a way of spreading her motivation.

“ Ensuring ICT access and safety for women and girls improves our access to employment opportunities. Likewise, it helps us to engage in social, economic and political spheres, as well as to fight for our basic rights and gender equality in the workforce. --Maha Sharbek, UN Volunteer Software Engineer with IOM, the Philippines

Despite having a degree, getting a job as a software engineer in Syria was a huge hurdle for Maha, because there were no specialized software companies in her city. She embarked on working remotely with companies outside her country as a software engineer until she got a job with a startup company. "At that time, I was the only woman in our small team," Maha says.

Maha had always wanted to work with a large team of professionals, and this pushed her to apply for a UN Volunteer opportunity she came across. "Joining the United Nations Volunteers (UNV) programme as a software developer in IOM's ICT Department in Manila changed my world," said Maha.

When she set her foot in the ICT Department in Manila, Maha noticed a significant difference from her previous working set-up. She was astonished to see many women in the field of technology, including in senior management roles. This motivated her to work even harder and keep improving.

"For the past three years since I joined UNV, I have learned a lot from the team. My assignment in Manila has prepared me to empower more young girls and women in technologies both here in the Philippines and back in my home country, Syria," explains Maha.

“ Maha's skills and experience make her a reliable partner in delivering the necessary Information Technology solutions. She can adapt to any situation and is always open to helping those in the field. She is friendly and always shares a smile with anyone in the office. -- Michelle Evangelista, the .NET team lead

Reflecting on her journey in the ICT sector, which is usually seen as a male-dominated field, Maha urges other women and girls.

“ I encourage fellow women and girls not to be discouraged by the hurdles they may face in this field. We have the ability to do anything; what we need is to have a 'SHE CAN-DO' mindset. --Maha Sharbek

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