# WOMEN IN TECH

Minutes



| Date | Monday 21st of November, 2022 |
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| Time | 17:00 – 18:00 |
| Venue | Portcullis House, Room M **and** Zoom |
| Chair | **Flick Drummond**, Co-Chair of the Women and Work APPG and MP for Meon Valley<br>and<br>**Jess Phillips,** Co-Chair of the Women and Work APPG and MP for Birmingham Yardley |
| Speakers | **Alex Davies-Jones**, MP for Pontypridd and Shadow Minister for Tech, Gambling and Digital Economy<br>**Nicki Lyons**, Director of Corporate Affairs and Sustainability at Vodafone<br>**Bev White**, Chief Executive Officer of Nash Squared |
| Theme/ Background information | Women are highly underrepresented in the technology industry with research highlighting that the percentage of women employed in tech in the UK has barely moved from 15.7% in 2009 to 17% in 2021. Worryingly, women still hold just 10% of leadership roles in the industry.<br><br>In March 2022 the government announced it will launch a new returners programme to help women back into STEM (science, technology, engineering & maths) careers. Research and employee feedback shows that returning to STEM roles after taking time out to care for loved ones can present significant challenges. This new programme will help organisations to recruit and retain talented staff who are often overlooked because of a gap on their CV, by providing training, development and employment support to those who have taken time out for caring. There is work being done to support women into the tech industry, but we believe more needs to be done, and sooner.<br><br>This session seeks to probe what the ongoing issues are that discourage women from entering the tech industry in the first place and those that create an ongoing struggle for women attempting to advance in this space. We seek to find the solutions to encourage women into tech jobs and to enable them to advance in leadership roles within the industry, breaking down the barriers for other women to succeed. |

# NON-VERBATIM MINUTES

**Alex Davies Jones MP**: Alex explained that she is working on the online safety bill, and that she is attempting to bring the bill back to parliament as soon as possible; women can only be empowered

online if they feel safe in that space. Misogyny must be classed as a priority harm. She clarified that she was planning to talk about Labour's policy on promoting women in the tech sector. Equality should be at the heart of any plan for growth. Alex said that she would outlaw making new mothers redundant until 6 months after their return from maternity leave. She would aim to give women a safe space in tech, backing supportive neonatal policies. Fertility policies are also important, with BT offering a particularly good one. The industry needs to be more accessible, for women in particular. TechUK have produced excellent research on this, specifically on causes of gender inequality. They found that one fifth of workers in the tech industry are women, while only 0.7% are women from ethnic minorities. Labour has pledged to train more teachers in STEM, and we need more women in these teaching roles. We should also discuss how we get more women into start-ups. Last week, Alex met with the Spitfire Project, who have sent women in STEM into schools to encourage schoolgirls to pursue careers in tech. We need to discuss how we encourage more women into the sector, and this starts in school with visual representation.

**Flick Drummond MP**: Flick thanked Alex, and handed over to Nicki Lyons, Director of Corporate Affairs and Sustainability at Vodafone.

**Nicki Lyons**: Nicki explained that she was at the session as a representative of the tech industry, and as a senior woman at Vodafone. She was acutely aware of the challenges getting women into tech, pinpointing three main issues: the need for a strong pipeline of talented women, the need for greater support in the workplace, and also greater support for returners. Vodafone tackles this through several policies: one in particular was through encouraging the non-birthing parent to take up to 16 weeks of paternity leave. This policy is about building a structure for the future and creating an environment where men understand the experience of leaving and returning to the workplace. This creates an environment where men are prepared to take on at least 50% of domestic responsibilities. If we can build this as a structure for the workplace of the future, we leave women in a much stronger position. Nicki explained that it's a personal issue for her, because she knows that if she takes time off when her children are ill, then that could be detrimental to her career. Men need to share this responsibility.

**Flick Drummond MP**: Flick thanked Nicki, and handed over to Bev White, Chief Executive Officer of Nash Squared.

**Bev White**: Bev White began by introducing the Nash Squared annual Digital Leadership Report. What they have found from doing this over the years is that the tech industry has been really poor at changing the leadership potential for women. It has stagnated at 12% for a while, but this year it has been nudged up to 15%. At this rate, we will have to wait until 2060 before we reach parity in the workplace. It is a fascinating sector and does not require everyone to be brain surgeons; Bev's maths teacher had told her that she had a terrible career ahead of her. She advised people considering a career in tech to have trust, and dive into it. This isn't a sector for just boys, but for everyone who cares about how the world works – plus it has a great pay package. But we have to start back at school. When Bev arrived at the APPG, she wasn't sure whether to knock; women need the confidence to take the initiative.

**Jess Phillips MP**: At this point Jess took over from Flick as Chair of the session and opened up the discussion. She said that the 16 weeks of paternity leave offered at Vodafone is really significant, but that we are quite a long way off most organisations putting in place this kind of structure. One idea to consider is government-set quotas. We could put in place quotas for the workforce which

influenced which companies received government funding. There's been lots of good schemes along these lines.

**Nicki:** Nicki then pointed out that quotas are less effective if the pipeline doesn't exist. We can look at incentivising business and inventing pilot schemes, and ultimately, we need more data. We don't really understand what is holding girls back. We also want to ask about what is happening to women in the workforce who "slip away". Vodafone HR has done some research on this. It's much easier for women with families, or for carers, if you can work from home. If you aren't having to commute into central London, you have more time in your day. Technological improvements and ways of working are all helping, but it is about all of the different pieces coming together. Companies can have targets, reach targets, gender-based targets, but if the pipeline isn't there, quotas won't help. There are some jobs that women do not seem to be attracted to. Jobs on the Vodafone networking team for example, going up towers. They just don't get female applications. Similarly with their IT team. It's really hard to target a diverse group of applicants. So, we need to understand why women slip away, and how to get women interested at an early age.

**Bev:** Bev then suggested that we consider role models, and how leadership in tech has to be balanced. If the leadership has not many or no role models, women won't follow. There are also some instances where women may pull the ladder up behind them.

**Jess:** Jess mentioned that she saw no sign of her sons being trained for jobs of the future by their education. Looking at their grammar school, their IT education was about using spreadsheets rather than proper tech.

**Bev:** T-levels are also an effective solution for this. You need to give young people the opportunity to learn about tech in schools, and then let them put what they have learned into practice.

**Alex:** If you want a good job, people stress a really linear passage that almost always involves university; let's move away from this linear route. There should be more apprenticeships.

**Baroness Uddin:** Baroness Uddin mentioned that she is co-chair on the APPG for the metaverse. She was learning that children are being incredibly violent on the metaverse, and it's a really difficult issue. Men are leading the development of the metaverse, as well as Crypto. Furthermore, there is no centralisation. Our government are used to giving international contracts mandating gender and LGBT equality. She also suggested that there is more to a lack of women in tech than issues with the pipeline, instead arguing that there is also embedded prejudice against women and minorities.

**Jess:** Labour has 51% women members, and that's because the party has a quota.

**Alex:** Alex then suggested asking the schoolchildren in the room, why they were not interested in tech?

**Audience member:** A schoolgirl in the audience explained that she had not enjoyed computing, and never really pursued it, but that she does like science and medicine.

**Bev:** Bev then asked the students about their classes focused on technology and computing, stating that she had been told that boys were more interested because of their interest in videogames.

**Audience member**: A teacher in the audience then explained that she had read a survey of female students, which found that the students said that they found the tech classes quite obnoxious, and that if there were female only classes they would contribute much more. The boys could make it quite a hostile environment, and the girls did not want to put up their hand. We say that we respect T-Levels as much as A-levels, but the private school down the road are not doing them. There are still structural inequalities against T-levels.

**Jess:** Maybe girls are so successful academically that they get pushed into university instead of tech qualifications?

**Baroness Uddin**: Are students going to see tech environments?

**Alex**: Nicki, what does Vodafone do to help at this level?

**Nicki:** Nicki explained that Vodafone have an effective apprenticeship and graduate trainee scheme, both with lots of routes in which don't look for STEM subjects. Many Vodafone roles don't require tech qualifications, and Nicki's own background is not in tech.

**Jess**: Jess then asked a student why they wanted to in tech.

**Audience member:** The student then said that he sees the metaverse as part of the future. People are already buying real estate in the metaverse and investing money.

**Audience member:** An audience member then suggested that we ought to be talking about STEAM not STEM, because we are excluding people with great skills. He suggested that there is room for quotas, but that the main important thing to do is to get young women in the industry going into schools and colleges. Nothing influences people more than sending role models into schools.

**Jess:** Jess then suggested that we remind students of the higher salaries in tech.

**Audience member**: An audience member suggested that if you go into schools and look at career advice, they often push towards university in order to fill their six forms; as a result, students lose out on the chance to earn while they learn. Women have a long history in computing, especially during World War 2 when women did a significant amount of code breaking.

**Jess:** Coding was invented by a woman. Jess argued that when it became a powerful job to have, it became a job that men did. When coding was secretarial, it was done by women. Jess agreed with the audience member on apprenticeships, explaining that her children do not want to go to university, but that as they come from a privileged background, they can do university later in their lives if necessary. There is definitely a class issue behind higher education options.

**Audience member**: An audience member then introduced herself as a software engineer who didn't study a technology degree at university. She stressed that we need to remind people that not all software is hardcore coding; there are lots of welcoming tech opportunities, and tech companies that are very open to women, especially in areas such as 'Femtech'. The metaverse has real creative opportunities that could be framed to be more attractive to women. At her company, to hire women for their 50/50, they had to branch out and hire women who had not done computer sciences, instead hiring women from physics and maths backgrounds. She recommended providing a roadmap

to continue supporting women in the industry, through mentors and role models. We are decades away from having an equal pipeline.

**Jess**: Jess commented that support is so important and keeps coming up. If you treat women poorly and don't have good parental leave policies and return policies, you will not keep women in the workforce.

**Alex**: Alex suggested considering women in tech who are not what we would typically consider techies, such as influencers. They may not be in the traditional tech sector, but they are contributing and innovating in their own way and working for themselves.

**Jess:** We paint the world of tech to all be aggressive men, and the online world reinforces this. Many women find social media to be horrible – Jess then asked if any of the students found this.

**Audience member:** A female student acknowledged that the internet is often a difficult place, is filled with harmful content such as body shaming.

**Jess:** Jess argued that we need better online regulation to address this.

**Bev:** Bev argued that we need women to be writing the algorithms to avoid online entities such as the metaverse becoming so open to misogyny.

**Audience member**: An audience member then pointed out positive uses of technology by women, particularly by female protestors in Iran.

**Jess:** Jess agreed that this was an excellent use of technology.

**Nicki:** On Vodafone's 16 weeks of parental leave, Nicki acknowledged that use of similar maternity policies is not widespread. Their approach is that a break should not impact anyone's career, and that a man taking a break should not be viewed any differently.

**Jess**: Jess then asked Nicki that if both men and women wanted to take leave, how would Vodafone manage this?

**Nicki**: Nicki responded that the policy is not impacted by when their partner takes leave. She said they want a shared policy which will help both men and women thrive in their careers. There are always children coming down sick or caring responsibilities coming up: society needs to move away from women being the automatic caregiver in these situations.

**Jess:** Jess said that you need both parents to pay for childcare. She explained that her husband has always been the primary caregiver, but this is exceptional.

**Audience member**: The audience member asked if the session thinks that this dynamic is changing?

**Nicki**: It is changing, which will in turn provide more role models. Her children are the same age, and she makes sure to talk to them about her being the biggest earner in the household.

**Audience member:** When the parents have high paying jobs you can choose which parent takes leave, but if you're poor you cannot make this choice. Flexible working has also been a huge enabler. It has freed men to see more of their children and to be more family oriented.

**Bev**: Bev suggested that need to change the dialogue, especially following her own experiences, such as being asked to get coffee at meetings despite her level of authority.

**Jess:** Jess then began to end the session by asking if attendees were to come up with a single recommendation for the government, what would it be?

**Nicki:** Invest in early years education to build equal role models and provide similar toys, while also having more men teaching in primary school to achieve more even representation. Nicki argued that we need to break down stereotypes at an early age.

**Audience member**: An audience member suggested that as men are now working as Uber drivers because it gives them flexibility to help with their families, does this point to social change?

**Jess**: There has been change, but not enough.

**Nicki**: Nicki added that we should build on lessons in schools about consent and how to act in relationships.

**Jess:** When my son read about an MPs son being attacked, he assumed that the MP was a man.

**Bev**: Moving on to later in school, Bev argued that girls start interested in tech, but later opt out because it's not set up for them. We should make it interesting to women. She explained that she now has 2000 software engineers working for her, of whom 44% are women.