Behind the Keys:
Women Who Secure the Future

(In)Securities Special Edition: Day 7 Featuring:

Fatema Fardan

Celebrating International Women in Tech Day

Fatema Fardan
## Digital Data Cybersecurity Lead

Fatema Fardan is an accomplished cybersecurity professional with over 16 years of experience in the financial and banking sectors. She specialises in cybersecurity, digital security, and information security, with expertise in business information systems, risk management, and fintech.

Fatema has a proven track record of leading enterprise-level security projects, including cybersecurity strategy development, risk assessments, security frameworks, and IT security system implementation. She is currently completing her Master's in Cybersecurity at the University of London, supported by Royal Holloway University.

An advocate for women in cybersecurity, she actively mentors young professionals through initiatives such as Women in Cybersecurity Middle East (WiCSME), INJAZ, and QUDWA. Her commitment to fostering diversity and empowering women in technology underscores her leadership in the field.

Feature in (In)Securities- Special Edition- Day 7

Fatema Fardan
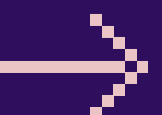
1. How have your advanced studies in cybersecurity influenced your decision to pursue a career in technology, and how did they shape your early career path?

I studied Business Information Systems (BIS) in college, which is a combination of business, IT, security, and programming. I started my career while still in my final year as a Sales Engineer in a small company in Bahrain, where I was introduced to the technical aspects of small and medium enterprises (SMEs).

I then had the unique opportunity to be part of the Association Program, led by the Bahrain Institute of Banking & Finance (BIBF) and almost ten of the biggest banks in Bahrain. I was selected from among hundreds of candidates by CitiBank, where I was introduced to the world of cybersecurity at its best!

This program provided a solid foundation for my knowledge, and I was fortunate to have a great manager who guided me as I launched my career in cybersecurity. It has been over 16 years since I started, moving from one bank to another in Bahrain while earning various professional certifications, including PMP, CISM, Certified Third-Party Risk Professional (CTPRP), and the Georgetown FinTech Program, among others.

Last year, I decided to continue my academic journey and pursue a master's degree. It was perfect timing, as my employer announced a sponsorship for one of its employees as part of Women's Day celebrations!

It has now been a year since I started my master's degree in Cybersecurity with the University of London, supported by Royal Holloway University.

Fatema Fardan
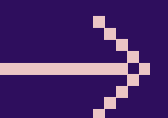
2. Can you share a defining moment in your career that reinforced the importance of integrating advanced knowledge into practical strategies?

I am one of the fortunate few who started a career aligned with my university studies—at least in theory! Hands-on experience came through an incredible 16+ year journey, and many defining moments come to mind as I reflect on this question.

1) Proving myself as a fresh graduate

As a fresh graduate, I had to work with senior teams and prove that I had what it took to be part of a leadership team. This was one of the biggest challenges that shaped who I am today. I was often given tasks beyond my experience level, forcing me to throw myself in the deep end before I was even ready.

I recall a significant meeting as an Associate Manager, where the Head of the Bank started discussing financial terms and numbers that were completely foreign to me as someone from an IT background. He questioned managers about different financial concepts, and while some struggled to respond, one of my fellow trainees answered his question perfectly.

That moment was eye-opening—I saw firsthand how knowledge gives you power. Determined not to be caught off guard again, I enrolled in a two-year Certified Accounting Technician (CAT) program to learn about bank statements, financial budgets, forecasting, and other essential banking concepts.
From that point on, I realised the importance of continuously building the right knowledge and asking the right questions to advance my career.

2) Winning the Women in TPRM Leadership Award

A more recent defining moment was in November 2024 when I was awarded the Women in TPRM Leadership Award—something I never expected!

Feature in (In)Securities- Special Edition- Day 7

Fatema Fardan

3. What challenges have you encountered as a woman leveraging both academic and professional expertise in cybersecurity, and how did you overcome them?

I won't claim that my journey was either extremely difficult or completely smooth—it was unique. As a Bahraini woman in a male-dominated field (both banking and IT), I faced challenges.

Sixteen years ago, cybersecurity was not as popular as it is today, and being a woman in the field did not make things easier. When I look back at old photos from cybersecurity training, events, exams, and community gatherings, I see how few women were present—often less than 1%.

I used to joke with two of my female friends (one of whom has since left the field) that we were survivors. Most of my female peers eventually left IT and cybersecurity.

One of my biggest challenges was the lack of a strong support system to guide me. There were times when my abilities and skills were questioned simply because I was a woman. One of my managers even told me outright that I was not selected for a task because I was female!

Today, things have improved. There are now mentorship programs and support networks for women in cybersecurity. The concept of mentorship is growing, and many initiatives are available to support women in technology and cyber.

Fatema Fardan
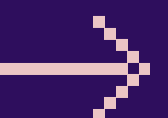
4. Who has been the most influential mentor in helping you balance advanced studies and a cybersecurity career, and what key lessons have you learned from them?

I have been lucky to have multiple role models, managers, and mentors throughout my career.

- **Husin Al-Balushi** – As part of my career program, I had a mentor I could trust and talk to at any time. As a fresh graduate, his expertise and guidance helped me understand the professional world.

- **Abdul Nasir (My first CISO) – He taught me everything I know today! His professional and technical expertise showed me what a true cybersecurity leader looks like. I still keep some of his notes 14 years later!**

- **Nahad Burdestani (The Iron Lady) – As a leader in operations, she demonstrated the power of wisdom, presence, and energy. She taught me how to turn qualities often seen as weaknesses into strengths.**

- **Nelson Villate (Another CISO I learned from)** – He challenged my thinking when I thought I knew it all. His trust in me to lead an E-Fraud function was a major turning point in my career, pushing me to earn additional certifications.

- **Amna Almadhoob (My partner-in-crime)** – She has been my go-to female cybersecurity expert, always providing valuable insights and support.

I have met and worked with incredible minds over these 16 years, and they have shaped me into the professional I am today. I am grateful to all of them—even those who made my journey difficult, as they also contributed to my growth.

Fatema Fardan
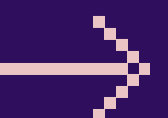
5. What challenges do women face in balancing continuous education with professional roles in the technology/ cybersecurity industry?

To be honest? Being a woman means you have to be a superhero!
And in cybersecurity, you have to be an extra superhero!

Women often juggle family responsibilities while striving to excel in their careers. This constant push to prove ourselves makes us resilient and driven.

I still remember working until the last day of my pregnancy—my water literally broke at work! When I returned from maternity leave, I successfully completed one of the most challenging projects for my bank while also earning a fintech certification.

Balancing multiple challenges at once is what makes women in cybersecurity strong, adaptable, and unstoppable.

Fatema Fardan

6. How has the industry evolved for women pursuing advanced knowledge alongside their careers?

The change has been huge!

At events I attend, I see more and more women in cybersecurity. At a recent panel discussion, one panellist remarked that there were more female cybersecurity professionals in our region compared to her company's headquarters.

Perhaps now men will need a group like Men in Cyber Security Middle East (MiCSME) to keep up! 😄

Fatema Fardan

7. How do diversity and inclusion foster innovation in cybersecurity?

Diversity and inclusion (D&I) are critical in fostering innovation. When combined with academic and practical knowledge, they amplify the potential for major breakthroughs.

For example, some banks now implement services to empower people with disabilities by enhancing security features and accessibility in digital banking. This holistic approach ensures that no user segment is excluded—true innovation at its best.

8. What cybersecurity trends excite you most right now?

I recently studied security behaviours in my master's program, and it made me realise how much we still need to learn about human behaviour in cybersecurity. I'm also intrigued by Cybersecurity Mesh Architecture (CSMA).

Gartner predicts that by 2025, CSMA will support over 50% of digital access control requests. This flexible, scalable security model enhances overall security posture through seamless integration.

Fatema Fardan

9. What advice would you give to young women pursuing both a career and advanced studies in cybersecurity?

Just go for it! Dive into the deep end.

If you're passionate about becoming a cybersecurity expert, understand that this is one of the most dynamic and challenging fields. You'll be constantly learning, reading, and facing new challenges every day.

If you think you can stop studying after earning your degree, then cybersecurity may not be the right field for you.

Also, stay humble. The new generation has great potential, but remember—no one knows it all. Relying solely on AI tools like ChatGPT won't make you an expert. Use your brain, think critically, and develop real problem-solving skills.

Fatema Fardan
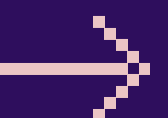
10. Can you share examples of programs or initiatives that effectively support women in combining professional growth with academic advancement in cybersecurity?

The UN offers several initiatives that support women in technology. For the past three years, I've been a mentor for the Women in Cyber Security Middle East (WiCSME) program, which was backed by the UN. This is a great starting point for women looking to grow in this field.

Additionally, FS-ISAC has various sponsorship programs aimed at supporting women in cybersecurity. They run an annual initiative designed to help women advance professionally in this space.

11. If you could envision an ideal future for women in cybersecurity, integrating academic and industry excellence, what would it look like, and what key changes would have been made?

I would integrate "Human Behavior" as a fundamental element in cybersecurity hiring and training. The human factor is often overlooked in our field, yet it plays a crucial role in security—whether in breach response, attack mitigation, or security testing.

By recognizing and leveraging human behavior in cybersecurity, we can better harness women's skills and strengths, enabling them to thrive in both technology and security leadership.

The future should focus not only on technical excellence but also on the human-centric aspects of cybersecurity, ensuring a more inclusive and effective industry.