

Worldwide news and comment

WORLD: TOBACCO INDUSTRY... EMPOWERING WOMEN, ONE CIGARETTE AT A TIME?

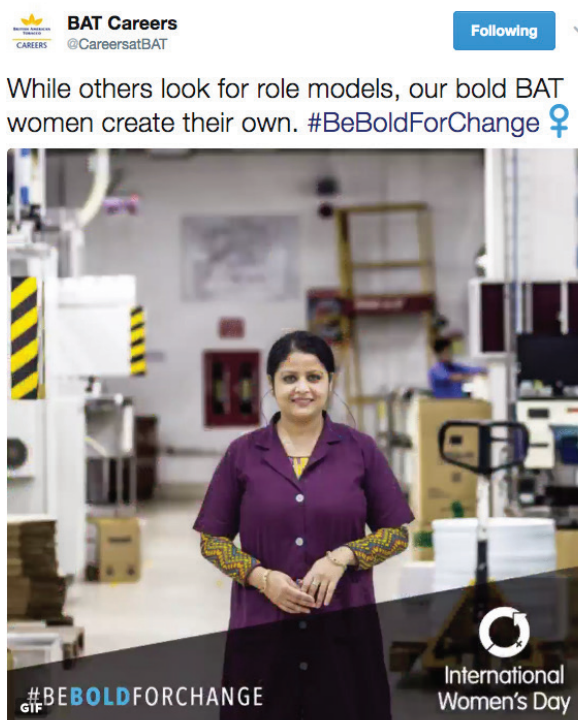
Celebrated globally on 8 March, International Women's Day (IWD) honours the social, economic, cultural and political achievements of women. The day also serves as a call to action for greater gender equality and is an opportunity to highlight the continued discrimination women face in areas such as education and employment.

The theme for IWD 2017 was 'Be Bold For Change', and IWD event organisers and participants were urged to embrace 'bold pragmatic action to accelerate gender parity.' The tobacco industry, true to form, issued corporate social responsibility messages in an attempt to reposition itself as generous, accountable and operating to high standards. IWD was exploited as an opportunity by both British American Tobacco (BAT) and Philip Morris International (PMI) to take to social media and post corporate feel-good content tagged with the #beboldforchange theme.

PMI included a 2-min video (14 000 views 24 hours after posting) on its Facebook page post that opens with the statement that "changing one woman's life can benefit a whole community". The video goes on to state that "for decades PMI has invested around the world to empower women to reach their full potential". The video also featured the Director of the Womanity Foundation discussing the value of partnership between corporations and the social development sector. PMI is a partner of the Womanity Foundation and supports its social development capacity building and mentoring programs in India and Brazil.

BAT posted two IWD messages on Twitter featuring a set of rotating images of female BAT employees. In the first post, three images of women, who appear to be employed in technical roles, are featured. The second post includes images of a small potted plant being given to female employees with an attached typed message extolling BAT's commitment to diversity.

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One of the images of women in technical roles at BAT, posted on International Women's Day. BAT, British American Tobacco.

While other corporations also used IWD as a public relations opportunity, the tobacco industry is uniquely hypocritical in its supposed advocacy of women's rights. These latest messages fail to mention the health toll of these companies' products and completely ignore the fact that the

tobacco industry has exploited the liberation of women to promote smoking. These self-congratulatory messages do not acknowledge that the tobacco industry also falsely reassured women that the secondhand smoke they breathe is harmless. This industry profits from the death



A tweet extolling BAT's commitment to diversity as part of International Women's Day. Source: Twitter



A mock-up of the Montreux Jazz Festival, reflecting the sponsorship by British American Tobacco. Credit: OxyRomandie.

of women and the addiction of young girls and yet it continues to shamelessly attempt to rewrite itself as a champion of women.

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UKRAINE: RECORD TAXES AND DROPPING YOUTH SMOKING PREVALENCE

In March 2017, the Ukrainian NGO Life Regional Advocacy Centre presented national survey results which showed an

impressive drop in youth smoking prevalence. The study, undertaken by the Kiev International Institute of Sociology, found that smoking prevalence among young people aged 18–30 years dropped from 37% to 26.7% during 2013–2017.

While the drop is good news and shows that fewer young people are taking up smoking, the study did find that younger people are the demographic with the most widespread hookah and e-cigarette use. In the previous 12 months, 14% of those under 30 years reported hookah smoking, compared with 6% of older smokers. The prevalence of e-cigarette use was similar, at 14% and 5%, respectively.

In addition to youth smoking prevalence dropping, the state budget of Ukraine received its highest ever revenue from national tobacco taxes in 2016. The figure of UAH33.2 billion (US\$1.2 billion) represented a 30% increase on 2015 revenue. The increase was due to higher taxes introduced on 1 January 2016, despite predictably strong opposition from the tobacco industry which included a scare campaign about illicit tobacco.

An additional tax increase of 40% was introduced on January 2017. It is expected to bring consumption down by a further 10%, and generate UAH7 billion in revenue.

THAILAND: NEW TAX EVASION CHARGES AGAINST PMI

PMI is facing a widening of the Thai government's investigation into the company for tax evasion. The investigation relates to alleged under-reporting of import prices for cigarettes imported from the Philippines, and activities stretching back as far as 2000. Charges were first laid in January 2016, with the Thai government seeking more than US\$2 billion in fines.

The most recent charges were disclosed in PMI's annual report with the US Securities and Exchange Commission, filed on 26 January 2017, and relate to imports from Indonesia. The Thai government is seeking an additional US\$562 million. The first hearing for the case is scheduled for April 2017.

The legal battle comes at a potentially challenging time for tobacco control in Thailand. Thai tobacco control activists are concerned a bill which was approved by the Thai cabinet in December last year that contains loopholes that could be exploited by multinational tobacco companies. The president of the Thai Health Promotion Foundation, Hatai Chitanondh, has raised concerns that the bill, which will turn the Thailand Tobacco Monopoly from a state enterprise into the Tobacco Authority of Thailand, might allow transnational tobacco companies to gain control of firms or public companies allowed under the legislation. This could pave the way for companies to produce a wide range of tobacco products.

UK: PMI ASKS GOVERNMENT FOR HIGHER TAXES

A report in UK media outlet *The Telegraph* on 3 March 2017 featured the rather unusual headline "Tax us more, world's biggest cigarette maker tells Philip

Hammond – to persuade smokers to use e-cigarettes” (Philip Hammond is the Chancellor of the Exchequer, head of Treasury).

The incongruity of a company which is facing tax evasion charges in Thailand asking the UK government to tax them more is striking enough, even more so to anyone who is familiar with the tobacco industry refrain that taxes do not work and only encourage illicit tobacco (a claim which stands in stark contrast to internal historical tobacco industry documents, which clearly show concerns that taxes are the biggest threat to consumption).

The reason for the headline? PMI expressed its support for tax increases in a budget submission sent in late February. PMI claims that raising taxes will help the company achieve its bid for a ‘smoke-free future’. *Tobacco Control* readers may recall PMI’s newly found zeal for a smoke-free world that was covered in the November 2016 issue of News Analysis and on our blog—see <http://blogs.bmj.com/tc/2016/12/01/is-philip-morris-claim-it-wants-to-phase-out-conventional-cigarettes-credible/> and <http://tobaccocontrol.bmj.com/content/25/6/612>.

This stated push for a smoke-free world by PMI has been heralded by some as an indication that the tobacco industry has changed its spots and public health should start working closely with it. The supposed alignment between the aims of public health and the tobacco industry has even had some tobacco industry cheerleaders proclaiming that it is the industry itself that offers the most promise for rapidly reducing the tobacco epidemic—despite the fact that no tobacco company has yet committed to phasing out combustible products. It is certainly a neat trick to try and undermine the first principle of Article 5.3 of the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control, which recognizes that “there is a fundamental and irreconcilable conflict between the tobacco industry’s interests and public health policy interests”.

As always with tobacco industry smoke and mirrors, the devil is in the detail: *The Telegraph* article notes that PMI support is for ‘proportionate’ tax increases. In this case, ‘proportionate’ means a measly 2%. The UK managing director of PMI said that he would not support higher taxes “because that would act as an incentive for smokers to switch to illicit cigarettes.”

Precisely why a 2% increase would be enough to entice smokers to switch to less-harmful products such as e-cigarettes, but a higher tax would see smokers switch to illicit tobacco, is not further

elaborated—although it is not hard for tobacco industry observers to deduce that 2% will comfortably maintain the status quo.

The tobacco industry and its supporters have earnestly defended PMI’s integrity and sincerity in its push to a smoke-free world. The smoke-free aspiration—always framed as an aspiration, never as a concrete goal—is based on large numbers of smokers switching from combustible cigarettes to e-cigarettes or emerging heat-not-burn products. PMI (and increasingly other companies) are positioning themselves as leading the way, framing strategies as a need to adapt to disruptive technologies.

Perhaps it is time for policy-makers to set these ambitions into legislative stone. As an expression of its sincerity, PMI has called for policy action to support the transition. Tobacco control advocates have noted the absence of a timeframe for PMI’s smoke-free world, and industry cheerleaders have defended the absence of a timeframe as responsible business practice.

One of the problems with the tobacco industry’s rhetoric about the issue is that it assumes the tobacco epidemic is simply a naturally occurring function of consumer demand, rather than a manufactured epidemic built on lies, seductive marketing and the addictiveness of nicotine. Discussion of abolition is always silenced by the conventional wisdom that ‘prohibition never works’. However, if heat not burn and e-cigarettes are the solution both industries claim they are, a logical path forward would be for policy-makers to create a legally required phase-in time for these products to completely displace the combustible tobacco market. Will this be the next leap forward in tobacco control, particularly in those countries that have embraced e-cigarettes?

EUROPE: BAT AND EUROPEAN UNION POLICY INFLUENCE—ANOTHER THIRD PARTY?

The Forum for European Union (EU)/US Legal-Economic Affairs met in Brussels, the heart of the EU, from 3 to 5 April 2017. The Forum is run by American not-for-profit research institute ‘The Mentor Group’ and describes itself as “a peer group of EU and US Supreme Court Justices, European Commissioners and their US counterparts, and corporate Chief Legal Officer”. It meets biannually to discuss legal and economic developments in the EU and the USA.

The Forum attracts high-profile speakers and participants. Last year

speakers included the EU Commissioner for Competition, Margrethe Vestager, and judges from the European Court of Justice. It is supported by membership fees paid by 26 large corporations including tech giants Apple, Google and Facebook, law firms Covington & Burling and Hunton & Williams, oil company Chevron, and BAT.

Internal BAT documents show that the tobacco company has used the Forum to access senior EU decision-makers in an attempt to influence any EU legislation and regulations which have the potential to harm its business interests, such as a ban on tobacco advertising. Furthermore, in the 1990s BAT used the Forum to promote its risk assessment agenda, which sought to fundamentally alter the process in which new legislation is considered. In essence, their aim was to encourage policy-makers to prioritise consideration of harms to business over other policy objectives. BAT’s role in the Forum was part of its successful multifaceted strategy to covertly shape the EU policy-making architecture to make it harder to pass public health policies.

Corporate lobbying remains a prominent issue in Brussels. Last year, following an investigation of tobacco industry lobbying of the European Commission, the EU Ombudsman, which investigates complaints about maladministration in the institutions and bodies of the EU, found that the Commission’s actions had not been fully transparent, with meetings between non-health elements of the Commission and tobacco industry representatives not always disclosed.

Membership of third-party organisations by the tobacco industry is a well-established strategy for the industry to ‘gain a seat at the policy table’. While direct meetings between EU officials and tobacco industry representatives have come under the spotlight in recent times, access facilitated by third-party organisations such as the Forum also require transparency to protect policy-making from the vested interests of the tobacco industry as required by Article 5.3 of the WHO FCTC.

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IRELAND: PLAIN PACKAGING PHASE IN TO START IN SEPTEMBER 2017

Starting from September 2017, Ireland will become the fourth country to have plain packaging of tobacco products. The commencement order for the legislation was signed on 29 March 2017.

The commencement applies to all products manufactured for sale in Ireland from 30 September and allows for a 12-month transition period for products already placed on the market. The legislation was a key action identified in the 2013 Tobacco Free Ireland policy document, which identified a target of a tobacco-free Ireland by 2025 (meaning smoking prevalence of less than 5%).

Ireland's current smoking prevalence for people aged ≥ 15 years is 19%. Nearly 6000 people die from smoking-related causes per year, and the cost to the Irish economy is estimated to be €10.7 billion per year.

Given encouraging early evidence from Australia that plain packaging both discourages uptake and encourages quitting, the introduction of plain packaging is an important step for Ireland to make progress towards its 2025 smoke-free goal.

ROMANIA: SMOKING BAN BOOSTS TOBACCO CONTROL RANKING

Romania is a star performer in the 2016 Tobacco Control Scale Report,

which was launched at the Seventh European Conference on Tobacco or Health, held in Portugal from 22 to 25 March 2017.

Romania moved from 19th place in the 2013 report to 7th position in the latest report. The improvement was largely due to the legislation for smoke-free enclosed public spaces. The country also adopted the European Directive on tobacco products. Public support for tobacco control policies was found to be high, at 85% in recent studies.

The result is a significant improvement from the 2013 report, in which Romania had dropped three places from the 2010 report. The UK continues to be ranked first, followed by Ireland and Iceland. As with previous years, Austria, Germany and Luxembourg continue to languish at the bottom of the table.

SWITZERLAND: BAT SPONSORSHIP CONTINUES FOR JAZZ FESTIVAL

While tobacco sponsorship is being squeezed out of music events in most countries by laws enacted in line with the FCTC or public pressure, or both, BAT

continues to sponsor the Montreux Jazz Festival.

The festival, held annually in July, is the second-largest annual jazz festival in the world. BAT is able to continue its sponsorship due to Switzerland's almost non-existent restrictions on tobacco advertising; the 2013 Tobacco Control Scale in Europe gave the country a score of 2 out of a possible 13 for legislation relating to advertising bans. Switzerland is one of a handful of countries to have not ratified the FCTC and appears determined to stay firmly in the 20th century when it comes to tobacco control legislation. Swiss NGO OxyRomandie has mocked up this year's festival poster to reflect the true nature of the tobacco sponsorship.

PODCASTS ON THE TOBACCO CONTROL WEBSITE

Podcasts are regularly published on our website with authors of recent papers published in *Tobacco Control*. Recent episodes include an interview with Mark Goodchild, lead author of the open access paper 'Global economic cost of smoking-attributable diseases', available at <http://tobaccocontrol.bmj.com/content/early/2017/02/02/tobaccocontrol-2016-053305>. This important paper found that the amount of smoking-attributable healthcare expenditure equated to US\$422 billion, 5.7% of the global health costs. The productivity loss due to disability and early mortality was just over US\$1 trillion. Other recent episodes discuss the paper 'Die Another Day, James Bond's smoking over six decades' (see <http://tobaccocontrol.bmj.com/content/early/2017/01/04/tobaccocontrol-2016-053426>) and 'Misperceptions of harm among Natural American Spirit smokers' (open access, <http://tobaccocontrol.bmj.com/content/26/e1/e61>). To view all episodes and listen to the podcasts, visit <https://soundcloud.com/bmjpodcasts/sets/tc-podcast>.



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A screenshot of a video posted by Philip Morris International which opens with the statement "changing one woman's life can benefit a whole community".