

Chapter 7

Individual Context

ABSTRACT

Chapter 7 looks at the individual and her influencing factors and concludes that the number of women in IT, or any career, is not a matter of them being pushed this way or that by the balance of societal forces, which we can adjust with the right lever. Rather, it comes down to each individual's choice based on her own values and what she wants out of life and her career. That is why no single "solution" has been found, and why a wide variety of solutions have had no significant impact—because there is no generic solution to finding out "what women want"—individually. What they want is what interests them, according to their individual circumstances, personalities, and values, and they are not so ignorant that most of them need interventions to know.

Happiness is that state of consciousness which proceeds from the achievement of one's values. – Ayn Rand

The unfortunate conclusion from the years of intervention programs aimed at increasing the representation of women in IT courses and careers is that none of them have worked. There have been a few individual cases where it has made a difference, and often a short term burst in favourable thinking about IT among the participants. But none of this has produced a measurable increase. This is succinctly stated by the European Commission's comment, "Trends show that there is no significant positive change...regarding the participation of women in the digital sector" (Quiros et al., 2018). The report further states that "It would be expected that many measures, which have been

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in place for more than 10 years, would have yielded more viable results.” That they haven’t surely must make us question the assumptions behind them.

Clearly the only way to increase the number of people pursuing a particular career is to increase the number of individuals choosing to do so. All the interventions in the world cannot achieve an increase if the individuals simply are more interested in other things. All the interventions in the world and all the progress in the world regarding women’s education and access to career choice *have not* achieved an increase. So perhaps we need to look more at the individual than at these external factors.

The impact of the individual has been examined in the literature by many researchers including Castano and Webster (2011), Ham, Junankar, and Wells (2009), Trauth (2002) and Trauth, Huang, and Quesenberry (2006). However, to date it has been done from the perspective of the individual as just another societal factor. It has been under a gendered view where generally the individual is assumed to be entirely malleable, an almost blank slate absorbing cultural, social and structural influences without any free will of her own. The problem with that approach is it ignores the fundamental strength, philosophy, values and will of the individual. This is especially ironic when one thing that characterises girls interested in STEM is strong self-will and confidence (Modi, Schoenberg, & Salmond, 2012).

Perhaps this is why no single “solution” has been found, and why a wide variety of solutions, such as those tabled in Figure 90 of Quiros et al. (2018), have had no significant impact – because there is no generic solution to finding out “what women want” – individually. What they want is what interests them, according to their individual circumstances, personalities and values.

It may appear to be an oversimplification to put the low number of women in IT down to the individual, when the individual makes her decisions in the context of the rest of her life experiences. But numerous results cited in earlier chapters indicate that most women who will be interested in fact already discovered their interest in their formative years. It is only a minority who discover it later in life through tasks assigned at work, and a much smaller minority who are influenced by interventions. That implies that the issue is not a large pool of women who would be interested “if only they knew”. Most of them already know.

Therefore our conclusion is that the number of women in technology, or any career, is not a matter of the balance of societal forces, which we can push one way or another with the right lever. It comes down to values, to the individual and their pursuit of happiness through their own values. It’s their choice and is highly internalised, having meaning for each individual.

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