Little Miss Geek Campaign Encourages More Girls Into Tech Careers

The movement grounds itself in a number of attention grabbing statistics: the fact that while women make up 49 percent of the UK labour force, they account for just 17 percent of IT and telecoms professionals, [1] a figure that is falling by 0.5 percent per year; that there was only one girl for every 11 boys in the average UK A-level computing class in 2011; the fact that four out of five gadgets are bought by women, but only three percent of creative directors in the industry are women. As the UK government's digital champion Martha Lane-Fox says in the introduction: "We have to shatter the perception that people who work in IT are sad, eccentric, pizza-guzzling nerds. Our girls must be inspired to become equal players amongst the next generation of inventors and technology leaders." As Lane-Fox points out, the world is becoming a digital one. If women aren't encouraged into tech careers at an early age, they will be excluded from a world of opportunity. "It's a digital world now and the digital world is for everyone. Don't let anyone tell you otherwise." Parmar is a vocal opponent to the "pink it and shrink it" tactics [2] employed by lazy tech marketers to appeal to women, but she is keen to point out that "women's rejection of the tech sector is every bit as damaging as the sector's condescending attitude towards female consumers." The book talks about a chicken-and-egg situation whereby the tech industry doesn't make an effort to be more welcoming to women, but that young girls are also programmed (no pun intended) from a young age to believe that technology isn't creative and isn't for them -- the book cites the fact that Lego tends to sit in the boys' aisles of toy stores as an example of early gender stereotyping. Like Lego, computers should be seen as gender-neutral creative tools from an early age. *Little Miss Geek* features some depressing pictures that young girls have drawn of "someone working in IT": men with glasses and a lack of interest in grooming. It also suggests that the ICT curriculum is lacking in creativity and is often introduced too late. Children should be allowed to hone their ICT skills across subjects -- from digital modelling in art class to learning basic programming in maths class.

This ties in with the idea -- proposed by Ian Livingstone [3] in the NextGen report of turning STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) into STEAM (where the A stands for art). As Google's Eric Schmidt said [4]: "You need to bring art and science back together". Lewis Carroll didn't just write *Alice in Wonderland*, he was also a mathematics tutor. By tying creativity to STEM subjects more closely, fewer women would abandon sciences for humanities at university level, argues the book. One the whole the book has a good balance of hard data and colourful anecdotes. It is also proactive, with practical tips for how schools and organisations could encourage more girls and women into technology.

As a person with ladybits who writes about technology, I find a lot of this "women in technology" drum-banging can get a little tiresome. Yes, there's an imbalance, but

shouldn't we just get on with doing our jobs rather than naval-gazing about our gender? Why should we drag those women that say they aren't interested into IT and technology careers? Do men sit around talking about how to redress the gender balance in childcare?

However, every time I find myself becoming frustrated or -- worse -- apathetic, I remind myself that soon we won't really talk about technology as a thing that we can choose to reject or accept, as it is disrupting every industry -- be it childcare, healthcare, finance, fashion, film or design. Technology isn't really something we can section off as "not for us"; we'll be left with nothing.

What I like about the Little Miss Geek campaign is that it is practical. It goes beyond merely moaning about the data; it outlines simple techniques that companies and schools can employ to address the issue. As Parmar says, the plan is to address gender imbalance in tech in the same way that Jamie Oliver tackled childhood obesity [5]. There is a manifesto that companies can adopt to attract more women to the workplace -- with initiatives such as apprenticeships, mentorship schemes, and "female heroes" programmes. Lady Geek also plans to run after-school coding clubs for girls and has started carrying out workshops in primary and secondary schools exploring boys' and girls' perceptions of the tech industry and attitudes towards the ICT curriculum.

Like Lego [6], let's not leave ICT and technology careers in the boys' aisle.

Fore more information about Little Miss Geek head over to the Lady Geek site [7]. The book is available to buy on Amazon [8].

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