Geeks versus princess engineers

By Jessica Taylor   12 Nov 2014

The Connected Women conference co-located with the GSMA's Mobile 360 Series-Africa on Wednesday, 5 November, facilitated conversation around accelerating the rise of the female digital economy, which was the theme of this year's event.

High-level speakers, both men and women, from across the globe discussed, among other topics, the challenges and opportunities facing the mobile industry in meeting the requirements of the future workforce, and what companies can do to attract and retain more female talent to ultimately address the mobile gender gap.

Anne Bouverot, Director General of the GSMA

According to the Boston Consulting Group, women control $20tn of consumer spending, which is expected to grow to $28tn by the end of the financial year. It's a combination of this consumer spending and their professional involvement in the mobile economy that Anne Bouverot, Director General of the GSMA defined as this so-called female digital economy.

Bouverot mentioned three things the industry can do to increase opportunities for women in mobile:

1. Continue to improve women's access to mobile
2. Increase awareness of careers for women in technology and mobile specifically
3. Make women in mobile and ICT the rule (something that's normal, expected even), not the exception

"We need to tell girls that mobile enables greater earning potential. In Europe, women in ICT earn almost 9% more than women in other parts of the economy. They only count for 30% of the workforce in mobile and ICT, yet they earn more than woman in other sectors.

"Many young girls I speak to have this image of mobile and ICT being a sector for a geeky young male who never shaves and works 24 hours a day in a garage coding," she said. Margaret Burgraff, Vice President Quality, Certification, Tools and Validation, Mobile Communications Group at Intel, agreed that there's a false stereotype: "It was always this awkward looking guy who was tech savvy, solved a big problem and got the girl in the end.

"I consider myself a geek. A geek can look like this too. A geek can wear pink dresses and can wear sparkles and be just as geeky as anybody else." She feels so strongly about this, that she plans to write a book titled *The Princess Engineer*.

Access to role models

In developing countries, there's a 25% access gap between males and females. "But there is that gap and we have got to make sure that we give our girl's access to PCs, access to computers and more than that, access to role models - people who look like them."

Moreover, "people are more likely to interview people who look like them." One of Intel's immediate goals is to match market availability, and in so doing, ensure that there's a female on the interviewing panel and force managers to throw the net wider in order to get more diversity. "We do see from a business case that we are at a market disadvantage if we do not have the buyers, the spenders represented and building the devices for the women of tomorrow.

"If women are responsible for 65% of all consumer electronic purchases, then why would we have men doing most of the designing of what some of the electronic products are?"

Perhaps larger than the global digital skills gap, though, is the "confidence gap" amongst women. "Girls have to just get the heck over themselves," said Burgraff. Catherine Luckhoff, CEO of HQ Africa agreed, "You have the ability as a girl to be just as good, if not better."

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