

Lack of support, mentors limiting women in tech

Robyn Farah, chairperson of Women in Tech South Africa, says that the solution for inclusivity in the local tech sector lies in encouraging and supporting women to pursue careers in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (Stem). But, global research shows that, from a young age, gender stereotypes lead many women to avoid studying Stem.



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Farah says that given South Africa's poor levels of math and science education – ranked 128th out of 137 economics in the 2017-2018 World Economic Forum's Global Competitiveness Index – many families cannot understand the value of math and science and instead encourage women to pursue more 'traditional' jobs.

Lack of support

"Young women embarking in Stem often don't have their family's support as a result. This means they need to turn to their fellow students for support, who are often mainly males and also struggle to understand why a woman is studying a Stem subject.

"This lack of support has proven to limit women participation," says Farah.



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She points to the 2017 Women in Technology global survey conducted by ISACA which revealed that a lack of female mentors (48%), a lacked female role models in the field (42%) and limited networking opportunities (27%) were some of the top barriers experienced by women in technology.

"We have witnessed first-hand how these barriers impact their contribution to our local tech communities," says Farah.

Tech communities

"In 2012 and 2015 respectively, we started two tech communities: Arduino Cape Town, aimed at those who design and

create in the world of electronics, and the Modern Alchemists for South Africa's Maker community, those into art, coding, gaming, electronics, music or any form of making and incorporating tech into their creations.

"The meetups offer a chance to interact with like-minded people, skill swap, ask for advice, and build relationships, but we quickly realised that these groups were almost solely attended by men and those women who did attend felt isolated given it was a male-dominated community."

Women in Tech Cape Town, which has close to 1,000 women, thus aims to empower gender diversity in the tech sector. This community, however, encourages men and women to participate. "We are strong believers that the greater the diversity, the better the solution," she says.

Farah concludes, "If we are to bridge the gender gap in South Africa, we need to understand that South Africa's challenges are unique when compared to Europe and the US, our struggles are broader. We need to start voicing these obstacles and work together to create solutions for the future we want to live in."

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