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Why do so few women in Bolivia opt for IT careers and what can we do to change this situation?

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Why do so few women in Bolivia opt for IT careers and what can we do to change this situation?

TREO Talk Paper

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Abstract

Although the number of girls and youth attending primary and secondary schools, as well as universities, has increased in the last decade in many countries around the world, the percentage of women who choose Science and Technology careers remains relatively low. This is also a reality in Latin America in general, and in Bolivia in particular. The academic literature has documented several projects aimed to increase gender diversity in IT majors, but very little research has been conducted and published in the context of Latin American countries. The purpose of this study is to understand the factors that influence career choice in STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Math) majors with an emphasis in Information Technology (IT) majors in Bolivia, a country in South America.

The data published by the Executive Committee of the Bolivian University (CEUB) reveals that between 2004 and 2015 women choose STEM courses less than men; women representing only 39.6% of the total number of students enrolled in natural and pure sciences careers, and only 29.1% in engineering and technology careers in 2015, while they most prefer social and humanistic science careers, being 58.9% of the total students enrolled in 2015 (CEUB, 2016).

Departing from extensive literature available on the subject at the international level, this study aims to shed light on the reasons why in Bolivian women choose IT majors less than men. Five of the six possible reasons highlighted in the international literature are contrasted through a mixed research approach with the Bolivian Case. These are: (i) cognitive abilities, (ii) relative cognitive strengths, (iii) occupational interests or preferences, (iv) lifestyle values or work-family balance preferences, (v) beliefs of specific skills in the field of study, and (vi) stereotypes and prejudices related to gender. The qualitative research stage consisted of: (i) 20 semi-structured interviews with experts, mainly university professors in the La Paz metropolitan area, as well as employers; and (ii) two focus groups of university students from the first year.

The preliminary results at this stage suggest that senior people agree that there is some gender discrimination at work in Bolivia, and that lifestyle values or work-family balance preferences might play an important role when people choose a major. Young people seem to be less aware of discrimination and tend to emphasize role models (or the lack of female role models) as an important topic. In addition, for the Bolivian case, the influence of parents seems to be very strong and might have some gender bias, as reported by young people. The access to computers and the higher cost of IT-related majors might also play a role in this context.

The goal of this TREO talk is to share these preliminary findings and discuss how to continue the study. Our purpose is to continue this research on the population of students finishing school and university students from the first year, both studying IT-related majors as well as not IT-related ones.