

“Girls Can’t Do That”: A Look at How We Condition Women Out of STEM Careers

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A universal trend that has been observed over the years is that women are disproportionately underrepresented in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) fields. Less women are pursuing STEM majors throughout all four years of college, and less women are retained in their STEM-related careers later down the road, but who is to blame? What is the cause? The focus of my research for the past two years has been to provide a comparative analysis of gender representation in the media in three separate countries: the U.S., the U.K., and the Netherlands. For the purpose of this presentation and for the sake of brevity, I will discuss the presence of gender stereotypes in Dutch media only. The study proposed will give more insight on which aspects of society condition young women out of STEM fields.

Through ethnography, a review of current literature, and field notes taken during my semester in the Netherlands, information was gathered about gender representation and existing disparities in Dutch media, particularly in their gendered television channels. Studies have been conducted to determine the difference in representation between these types of channels. No matter where in the world one is born, within a the first few years of life a child begins to develop their own thoughts and ideas about gender. These ideas guide them in the activities they partake in and what they find interesting, which is why it is important that the influences on young people be closely examined. The socialization of gender and the gender norms we impose on young people make a significant mark. These stereotypes manifest themselves in many ways, but they often condition young men and women to think of gender in a certain way. By examining how gender stereotypes affect women in those three regions, I was able to get a better understanding of what research needs to be done to gain a firmer grasp on why certain gender disparities in STEM fields exist. Based on lived experiences and earlier studies, this presentation suggests that there may be a correlation between the gender roles and norms one is exposed to throughout their life and the career one pursues.

By examining how gender stereotypes affect women in those three regions, I was able to get a better understanding of the future research needs to be done to gain a firmer grasp on why certain gender disparities in STEM fields exist. I propose to conduct a randomized survey with high school students in which they are asked about their career interests, how they developed their passion for that subject, and how long they have had that interest. It is important that both male and female students are surveyed for comparison purposes. A survey like this is a necessary step toward understanding whether or not the gender norms and stereotypes we enforce on young people conditions women out of pursuing STEM careers. My research is an attempt to help fill a gap in knowledge on the root causes behind the gender disparity in STEM.

