

OPINION

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What do you want to be when you grow up? The question that (still) has gender



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What do you want to be when you grow up? This recurring question, asked by parents, family and friends, aims to explore the vocational guidance of children, sometimes too young, and adolescents. But rarely do we stop to question how those same desires are built. Are they free choices or, perhaps, responses preconfigured by a social script that we have been internalizing for years without realizing it?



The figures, cold and relentless, map a deep and structural gender gap.



The answer seems to be in hard numbers. For example, in Spain, in the field of computer science, women represent less than 20% of students, while in the branches of Education and Health they exceed 75%. This segregation does not stay in the classrooms: only 17.5% of the employed population with STEM training are women. The figures, cold and relentless, map a deep and structural gender gap.

Behind this data there is not only a lack of vocations. What really operates is a collective imaginary that, in a subtle and powerful way, dictates from childhood what the tastes, aptitudes and "natural" territories are for both, women and men. This mental landscape, shared socially, is not innocent: reproduces and perpetuates a clear gender division of paid labour. While channeling female talent, almost automatically, to spheres linked to care and the humanistic, it is raising invisible barriers, but very real, that take girls and women away from the spaces where the future is designed and codified: technology, engineering and mathematics. The challenge, therefore, goes beyond encouraging girls to choose a technical career. It is about dismantling, brick by brick, the foundations on which we build their dreams.



If the collective or social imaginary leads the way

It is in the field of gender identity where the personal battle to follow or deviate is fought. While the imaginary is external (what is "expected"), gender identity is the internal, deep and felt experience of each person regarding their own gender perception and is forged in constant interaction with that social environment.

From childhood, we received a constant barrage of messages about what it means to "be a girl" or "be a boy." These messages are not neutral: They come loaded with attributes, colors, games and, crucially, skill expectations. The feminine is associated with empathy, care and verbal expression, and the masculine with rationality, technical competence and object orientation (interest in things rather than people).

Conflict arises when a girl with talent and innate curiosity for technology, mechanics or mathematics perceives that this interest does not fit into the "script" of the gender that has been assigned to her. That is when powerful deterrent mechanisms act. For example, "the imposter syndrome", with that constant doubt: "Am I really qualified for this?" or "the pressure for coherence" where the environment (couple, family, sometimes teachers) can, unconsciously, press for it to align with interests "more in line" with their gender.

Faced with this reality, the question ceases to be why there are so few women in STEM to become how we build an ecosystem that not only invites them but retains and celebrates them. The answer is not to change girls, but to transform the environment around them. The challenge, therefore, goes beyond the figures: it is about creating a space where gender identity ceases to be a straitjacket that limits the expression of talent, and where all scientific curiosity can find its way without filters.



If we are not reflected in books, media or have any references, women can hardly project ourselves as engineers or scientists.



To break this cycle, we urgently need to create those mirrors: the education system should integrate mentoring programmes with STEM women and review their materials; companies, cultivate genuinely inclusive cultures that go beyond quotas and promote leadership; and you girls, I encourage you to look for your tribe, to ask questions without fear and to confidently reclaim your space in innovation. Your unique perspective is fundamental to building a more humane technological future.