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GENDER, ENTREPRENEURSHIP AND DIGITALIZATION: CHALLENGING GENDER INEQUALITY IN ICT HIGHER EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

Mainstream representations of entrepreneurship are often informed by masculinity as a tacit norm, and that women's and men's entrepreneurship is often compared without a deeper gender analysis, which typically leads to depiction of women as less entrepreneurial and deficient when compared to their male counterparts (Ahl, 2006; Ahl and Marlow, 2012). Digital technologies, entrepreneurship and gender are deeply intertwined, and so, in order to understand and challenge gender inequality within entrepreneurship, it is pivotal to render visible the links between entrepreneurship and ICT and to challenge gender inequality within the ICT field. There is a commonly held assertion that the ICT sector, including education, is male dominated (Buse, 2018). This discourse is built on a rather narrow and simplified view of ICT profession, its use and design. Digitalization has introduced profound systemic societal changes, transforming traditional sectors and work practices (Bradley, 2017), inflicting structural changes on what ICT profession and education is. Additionally, it has given rise to novel, non-standard employment forms e.g., influencers, which is mostly dominated by women. While we recognize that dominating discourses are built on a view of a systematic underrepresentation of women in ICT related education, we posit that this is not a universal and homogeneous issue. There are some ICT education programs which attract women, in some instances more than men. The overarching aim of this study is to explore the relationship between gender, entrepreneurship and digitalization. Specifically, to explore why women choose a higher education in ICT and how they perceive and relate to entrepreneurship as a natural progression after graduation. Understanding of this intersection is an important contribution as gender equality in the fields of entrepreneurship and ICT are pivotal for a more egalitarian and socially sustainable society.

To understand this issue, an online survey was distributed to all female students in ICT higher education programs. For the selection of the study programs, we followed Clear and Parrish (2021) who delimit computing education to the following programs: computer engineering, computer science, cybersecurity, information systems, information technology, software engineering and data science. The survey

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was designed and administered in two languages: English and Swedish, so students had the possibility to choose the language they preferred. After a three-week survey period, a total of 82 out of 276 students responded to the survey.

Preliminary results from the survey reveal several trends within the studied programs. The survey included questions on the motives behind the choice of the program, perceptions of planned progression after one's studies and perceptions of gender balance and inclusion in the program. For example, regardless of the number of women enrolled in a program, all programs show a trend of students disagreeing or being neutral that the gender balance in their program is good. Moreover, regardless of the number of women enrolled in the programs most respondents maintain that the gender balance in their program is not good. Overall, the survey results indicate that most participants either disagreed that the gender balance in their program was good or had no opinion about it.

The contributions of our study are several. Our study makes it possible to theorize the drivers and motives of women that choose ICT programs and what working life outcomes are the most attractive for them. Moreover, our study allows us to theorize women students' views and perceptions of gender in ICT education, for example which of the methods for increasing gender balance in ICT education are perceived as effective. Thus, our paper's result shows what factors outside and within ICT education are motivating for women, and what measures could be taken to continue working with gender equality and inclusion in ICT education.

Keywords: ICT, women, ICT higher education, girls, digital transformation

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