

# Do women in ICT have more to prove?

The ranks of software programmers and IT project managers, business analysts, and consultants include very few women. But is this because of either active or subconscious discrimination against women? And what is the role of men in preventing their daughters from studying and practising IT disciplines?

Chimwemwe Sichali, initially from Malawi, and Charlene Tshitoka, who was born and raised in the Democratic Republic of Congo, now both work in Braamfontein, South Africa, for the African regional office of ThoughtWorks, a global software development company with a difference.

ThoughtWorks develops software in the so-called "agile" manner, which requires programmers, project managers, and consultants to have continuous interaction with large sections of the client's employee base. This is because the agile methodology works through user feedback on small pieces of working software supplied on a frequent basis. This continuous, incremental process ensures that the software delivered always serves its purpose, minimising the waste of human and financial resources.

By contrast, in software development undertaken by conventional approaches, only 30% of the software delivered is actually used.

## Interactive, human-focused approach

ThoughtWorks' interactive, human-focused approach does not permit "geeks" to hide behind their computers in a forgotten corner, creating code.

"At ThoughtWorks, I've had the unusual experience for a software developer of participating in meetings in which members of the client discuss with our team the project's progress and, jointly, trigger new ideas," said Tshitoka. "In the process, the only discrimination I've experienced has been in my own mind.

"I find myself thinking that I don't deserve to be talking here and that what I say is not going to be as good as when a man says it. I have to work all the time on overcoming that fear."

## Considerable resistance from her older brothers

Although Tshitoka has always had support from men inside her profession, she did have to overcome considerable resistance from her older brothers who told her, when she expressed a wish to study computer engineering, that no man would want a woman who spent all her time doing "technical stuff".

All Tshitoka's brothers are professional men with university degrees. Tshitoka's success has changed their views, but some of their daughters still believe that studying in "men's fields", such as computer science, would reduce their chances as "exemplary women in society".

Tshitoka's brothers could not argue when she was one of 11 Congolese learners to win a scholarship that secured her a place at the Tshwane University of Technology in Pretoria, South Africa.

Tshitoka said that she now tells her nieces that there is no reason why a woman in a technical field business should not have a happy family life. She cites her marriage to an electrical engineer as an example. "He's a geek, too. So he understands my passion for technology."

Sichali, a senior consultant at ThoughtWorks, encountered no family discrimination against her interest in IT, although some of her friends thought her choice odd. Initially planning to study medicine or teaching at university, being the only careers she'd heard of, she changed her mind when she discovered the lack of female representation in IT.

She was driven by the challenge of being one of the very few Malawian women to study computer science. Although she didn't study technology for its own sake, she says that she is now stimulated by its dynamic, continuous evolution and its enablement of business.

Sichali's 10 years in the IT industry have included leading a team that set up from scratch, a new bank in Malawi.

Like Tshitoka, she experienced almost no gender discrimination from her clients, but some of her male peers were hesitant about her capabilities. She remembers one job interview in which she had to put the male interviewer at ease by demonstrating that she knew the technology he was talking about.

"It was interesting that he did not take for granted that I had the credentials for a job I had applied for and for which I had submitted my CV and references."

Sichali believes that the issue often raised in Africa about men preferring stay-at-home women should be addressed from the perspective of a work/life balance. She manages to be a mother, a wife, and keep abreast of technology by being disciplined, setting achievable goals, and looking at things in a positive way.

## **No need for self-sacrifice**

"There's no need for self-sacrifice. For instance, had I not moved from Malawi when my husband took a job in South Africa, I wouldn't have encountered ThoughtWorks and experienced an entirely new way of developing software as well as managing projects.

"Instead of the layers of hierarchy I've been used to in other organisations, at ThoughtWorks I am part of a much flatter structure, a much more distributed leadership style. ThoughtWorks also consciously chooses a diverse culture. All of which is extremely empowering - for everyone."

While neither woman has experienced discrimination that held back their careers, they know that most women need encouragement to think in terms of breaking into an apparently male-dominated environment.

"Had I been discriminated against early on, I might not have got to where I am now," Tshitoka said. "So, it's vital for those of us who have succeeded to show others what's possible." Having been a lecturer at the Tshwane University of Technology, she experienced the joy of seeing "the sparkle in someone's eyes when they understood something they had thought was difficult" and continues to mentor female IT students.

In Malawi, Sichali organised a forum through which women interested in IT were introduced to new open-source technologies. The forum grew to a point where it included women from a wide range of African countries.

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