Breaking Barriers and Igniting Imagination: Lessons from Women Technology Empowerment Center's "She Creates" Summer Camp

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Harvard Kennedy School | August 2019

What kind of world would we live in if young girls and boys were allowed to dream infinitely? What would that world look like if we provided young dreamers with the opportunities, resources and support needed to achieve said dreams? In our current world, what does it mean for young girls to see female role models pursuing their dreams in a male dominated field? These are some of the questions that come to mind as I think about the work of organizations such as Women Technology Empowerment Center (W.TEC) in Nigeria.

Founded in 2008 by Oreoluwa Somolu Lesi, WTEC is a leading organization that works to close the gender gap in the information and communication technology sector. They do this through several after school clubs, technology camps, conferences and other programming. This summer, they are running residential and non-residential technology camps for secondary school aged girls (She Creates Camp) and primary school aged boys and girls (The Early Innovators Camp). I had the opportunity to observe some of the She Creates camp activities and speak with staff and students about their experiences at WTEC. More specifically, I was able to sit in on one of their career talk events where the executive director, Ms. Lesi interviewed two women who are leaders in the field of financial technology. The first panelist was Ms. Odunayo Ewenyi, co-founder and chief operating officer of PiggyVest, an online savings and investment platform that is revolutionizing financial literacy and savings culture in Nigeria. The second panelist was Ms. Bode Abifarin, chief operating officer of Flutterwave, an integrated platform that streamlines payments across businesses, banks, and individuals globally. The panelists shared some words of encouragement to the girls of the She Creates camp and shared stories of their past and present experiences of thriving and not only surviving as boss women in male dominated tech ecosystems. The career talk ended in an enlightening Q and A that was very interesting.

Even beyond the nuggets of wisdom shared on the career panel, I gained loads of insight from speaking with WTEC staff members and students. As a political science doctoral candidate studying the role model and peer network effects of economic empowerment initiatives on socio-political empowerment, the impact of organizations like WTEC is particularly interesting to me. These are some of the many things that I learned during my time with WTEC:

- The power of role models: In Positive Psychology, there is the notion that role models significantly affect one's sense of self and ability to achieve. In addition to having career panels with women in tech, WTEC's learning space has a public display of Nigerian women leaders in tech. I think it is very important for young girls to see people who look like them defying the odds to accomplish great things. In addition to learning about artificial intelligence and the internet of things, the students are also being exposed to potential role models whose narratives help push the boundaries of the young students' imaginations. From Albert Bandura's *An Agentic Perspective on Positive Psychology*:
  "Models are sources of aspiration, competencies, and motivation. Seeing people similar to oneself succeed by perseverant effort raises observers' beliefs in their own abilities." (Bandura, 2008. p.169)

- Diversity of career aspirations: One of the things that stood out to me about the WTEC campers was how broadly they thought about their professional futures. When asked what career paths they want to pursue, the students went beyond the typical doctor, lawyer, engineer list, but also mentioned interests in graphic designing, animation, event planning, accountancy, and cosmetic artistry. The camp is clearly having an impact on their capacities to imagine a diversity of professions.

- Broadening the meaning of working in the technology space: There are many misconceptions people have regarding what it means to work in tech. The panelists dispelled many of the myths of tech careers such as the notion that only those who are coders or programmers work in tech for instance. They also stressed the need for business management and interpersonal skills in the tech industry.

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- Tech is not a panacea: Though technology is a big part of society at present and will continue to change the way we live in the future, what the students are really being taught is how to be problem solvers. The students had the chance to learn about technological advances and benefits to society through a presentation from a representative from MainOne, a broadband infrastructure company. In the Q and A portion that followed, one of the students with interests in neurosurgery shared her opinion that robots could not take over expertise in complicated medical procedures. I spoke with the student afterwards and we had a riveting conversation on the variety of ways in which technology could be deployed for good or evil. In the end, we concluded that human beings and their motivations are what define how tech will shape society. Tech is not a panacea. Rather, it is yet, another tool that can be leveraged in various ways.

- Impact on staff and students: The staff and students all had great things to say about WTEC. When I asked the students about their favorite part of the camp, most of them said they particularly enjoyed the hands-on nature of the creative projects and how they were being tasked to think critically about community issues that they would like to solve. The staff also expressed that being part of the WTEC community is also sharpening their exposure to and knowledge of various facets of technology.

As I think about WTEC's place in the greater tech ecosystem, I am optimistic about the role of Africans in leading positive change across the continent. The nature of socio-economic growth and development in the 21st century is changing, and Africa is leapfrogging development by leveraging technology to transform the global economy. Given Nigeria's standing on the continent as a major hub of economic activity, many of the innovations in tech are taking place in major cities such as Lagos. Initiatives such as WTEC's "She Creates" camp, African Women Power Network's "She Works in Tech" and many others are not just teaching people coding and design skills. They are working on closing the gender gap in the tech space while inculcating values of authentic leadership and creative problem solving in their students. I will conclude by saying that

the future is indeed bright, and women are at the forefront of the tech revolution that is taking place across Nigeria, Africa, and the world.

References

Bandura, Albert. 2008. "An Agentic Perspective on Positive Psychology" *in Positive Psychology: Exploring the Best in People Vol1: Discovering Human Strengths* Greenwood Publishing Group