Abstract: Understanding women’s presence in ICT: intersecting issues throughout the lifecycle

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A great deal of research and practical effort has been devoted to trying to achieve some kind of gender balance in ICT professions, apparently to little effect. Women still make up less than 20% of ICT professionals in most OECD countries, and there is little sign of any substantial increase in their presence. This might be due to our failure to properly understand the factors involved in women’s absence, or to the conception and design of remedial measures aimed at raising their participation. If our research and action is to effectively address the gender imbalance in ICT, we may need to reconsider our approach to the problem.

In this paper, we advocate the adoption of a ‘lifecycle’ approach to the understanding of women’s trajectories through ICT studies and careers. We believe that such an approach has several advantages over established models such as the ‘leaky pipeline’ approach. First, it allows us to identify the main factors affecting women’s engagement in ICT at successive points in their lives, and whether these have a cumulative effect on women. Second, we can highlight the key transition points in women’s lives, at which their attrition from this field is particularly marked. Because of this, we can show how and when women’s career patterns are shaped not only by factors in the education or workplace sphere, but also by the domestic relations and divisions of labour in which they are involved. Finally, it involves recognition of the role of women’s own decisions and choices, as they shape and respond to their situations.

Our approach also incorporates analysis of some of the key contextual factors which shape patterns of women’s engagement in ICT studies and careers. Comparing the Spanish and UK environments, we find great contrasts in the education systems, the gender regimes and family structures, and the employment cultures in the two countries. All have a decisive influence on women’s careers in the ICT professions in these countries.

The lifecycle approach therefore offers a fruitful way forward both analytically, and in understanding and designing practical interventions to the problem of women’s under-representation. It allows us to identify specific areas or lifecycle points requiring targeted action, and to differentiate priorities according to different circumstances.