Gender gap in computer science studied

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Computer science diplomas are overwhelmingly earned by males, but a study of 21 nations suggests the gender gap involves much more than genetics.

"Restrictive government practices that minimize choice and prioritize merit may actually result in more gender-neutral distribution across fields of study," the researchers said.

The scientists analyzed data on degrees awarded during 2001 in such fields as engineering and math-physical sciences. They found, as expected, women predominate in such traditionally female-typed fields as education and health, but lag in stereotypically masculine fields.

In computer science, females are underrepresented in all 21 of the industrialized countries considered.

"The ubiquity of women's underrepresentation attests to the persistence of deep-seated and widely shared beliefs that men and women are naturally different and that they are suited for different occupations," the authors wrote, but said there was little evidence of social evolution since the most economically developed nations do not produce the greatest number of women in computer science.

Co-authored by Maria Charles of the University of California-San Diego and Karen Bradley of Western Washington University, the study was presented during last weekend's 100th annual meeting of the American Sociological Association in Philadelphia.

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