Facebook, LinkedIn join to help women in tech

February 6 2015, by Martha Mendoza

In this photo taken Tuesday Feb. 3, 2015, Facebook chief operating officer Sheryl Sandberg answers questions in an interview at Facebook headquarters in Menlo Park, Calif. A new Facebook and LinkedIn collaboration announced Friday, Feb. 6, 2015, seeks to boost the dwindling numbers of women studying engineering and computer science today, a field booming with lucrative Silicon Valley jobs long dominated by men. (AP Photo/Eric Risberg)

(AP)—Facebook and LinkedIn want to boost dwindling numbers of women studying engineering and computer science with a collaborative

initiative announced Friday that they hope will eventually fill thousands of lucrative Silicon Valley jobs long dominated by men.

In an exclusive joint interview with The Associated Press, Facebook Chief Operating Officer Sheryl Sandberg and LinkedIn CEO Jeffrey Weiner said they're launching mentoring and support programs at colleges to get more women involved in studying technology in general, but also as future employees for their companies.

Fifteen percent of Facebook Inc.'s employees working in tech jobs and 31 percent of all employees are women, according to diversity figures the company released last year. At LinkedIn Corp., women comprise 17 percent of its tech employees and 39 percent of employees overall. Most Silicon Valley companies have similar demographics.

Telle Whitney, president and CEO of the Anita Borg Institute, which is a partner in the initiative, said diversity brings greater innovation in technology.

"Think about it," Whitney said. "If everybody who creates a product looks the same, you know the results won't be nearly as interesting. We want for the sake of our future to have women involved in all the projects that will change our lives."

Sandberg launched an international conversation about the dearth of women in positions of power with her 2011 book "Lean In: Women, Work and the Will to Lead." She has pressed to bring about change through her nonprofit LeanIn.org, which will provide a platform for the support groups.

"A lot of our consumers, at least half, sometimes more, are women. We build a product that gives people a voice. We know we can't build a product for the world unless our teams reflect the diversity of the people

who use the product," she said.

In this photo taken Tuesday Feb. 3, 2015, drawings depicting chief operating officer Sheryl Sandberg are shown above the many language editions of her book "Lean In: Women, Work and the Will to Lead," in a conference room at Facebook headquarters in Menlo Park, Calif. A new Facebook and LinkedIn collaboration announced Friday, Feb. 6, 2015, seeks to boost the dwindling numbers of women studying engineering and computer science today, a field booming with lucrative Silicon Valley jobs long dominated by men. (AP Photo/Eric Risberg)

But the talent pool is shrinking: The percentage of people enrolled in

undergraduate computer science programs who are women peaked at 35 percent in 1985 and is now down to about 17 percent.

Weiner said LinkedIn needs gender equity to better serve users.

"To limit the perspective of the people building our product and services, if that's too narrow, it's going to lead to suboptimal outcomes," Weiner said.

The executives would not disclose how much of a financial commitment they are making, but the investment is different in that it's more focused on peer groups and a mentoring process already established through Lean In Circles. They hope it will go global, with groups at public and private universities.

Stanford University computer science student Lea Coligado, 21, said she and her female colleagues could use the support and mentorship.

"There's so few of us, so we definitely stick together," she said. "I think there's a stereotype. It's understated and people don't want to say it out loud, but it's there—the idea that women are just not very good at computer science—and some use that to justify why our numbers are so low. It's flabbergasting."

Coligado is not only good at programming, she loves it.

"Programming teaches me a very distinct way of thinking," she said. "If I have a problem, I break it into chunks and conquer it."

Paige Rogalski, a senior at Santa Clara University studying computer engineering, said she saw the already scarce number of girls in her program leave in their first year.

"I think it was because of the intimidation factor," she said. "Computer science has been a male-dominated field."

She said that while she's been mentored and largely supported, she also hears sexist comments and jokes, and was once told that her appearance was a factor in why she was hired.

"It still bothers me that as a woman I have to overcome prejudice and the sexualized view of women in order to be taken completely seriously," she said. "On the other hand, this comment has pushed me to work harder and have my effort and my work stand out and be what I'm known for."

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