Progress, but uphill slog for women in tech

November 10 2016

A Websummit attendee tries a virtual reality goggles during the Web Summit at Parque das Nacoes, in Lisbon on November 10, 2016

They are under-represented in the industry and sometimes made to feel unwelcome in geek-infested workspaces, but women are making their voices heard at Europe's largest technology marketplace.

Organisers of this week's Web Summit in Lisbon said nearly half its 53,000 attendees were women, helped by their offer of free tickets for female entrepreneurs in a drive to try to rectify a large gender imbalance

in tech.

The scale of the industry's challenge remains immense. In France for example, 91 percent of startups are run by men, according to a study last year.

Rana el Kaliouby, chief executive of the artificial intelligence startup Affectiva, called for gender quotas in recruitment at tech firms.

"Women are the majority of gamers, they spend the most time on social media, they make the most app purchases, but they're not part of the design process and the (development) of these technologies. That is a problem," she said in Lisbon.

"When you don't get the female perspective, you miss out entirely on an opportunity to leverage that."

The homogeneous workforce in the US technology industry became a hot topic after an attention-grabbing civil trial in 2014 that aired charges of sexism at a powerful Silicon Valley venture capital firm and disclosures by internet titans that workforces are mostly male, and very white.

Hillary Clinton's agonising failure to break through the ultimate glass ceiling, in losing the US presidential race to Donald Trump, was a motif of discussion at the Web Summit as tech evangelists fretted about the consequences for their industry.

Tony Conrad, founder of the about.me blog site, said Trump's views on women and immigrants were "antithetical to everything we in the tech community believe in".

"We already have gender imbalances in tech companies specifically. I

don't know the impact specific to our community, but as a society the impact is going to be profound. It sends a really bad message."

British model, actress and founder of Impossible Lily Cole attends a talk at the Future Societies stage during the Web Summit at Parque das Nacoes, in Lisbon on November 10, 2016

A long way to go

Still, there was recognition of the efforts in Lisbon, where the summit set aside a "Women in Tech Lounge" and organised several panels to discuss the gender question.

"There is this space (the lounge), coffee breaks and even events just for us, lot of opportunities to meet and discuss, for networking," said Carla

Barros, who heads strategy and marketing for a digital firm in Brazil.

The imbalance, however, remained plain in the makeup of panel discussions at the Web Summit, which likes to promote itself as "the Davos for geeks" and provides a platform for startups to hook up with venture capitalists and hear about new trends from industry leaders such as Facebook.

Of the 663 speakers on the various stages over the week, only about 100 were women.

"Even here, where we have a private space for women, you only have white men in their 40s speaking on stage. There isn't much diversity," said Maria Ines, who heads digital marketing at a Portuguese hotel group.

"When you look at the upper hierarchy of companies, you can see only men. We still have a long way to go," she said.

Female speakers included Rebecca Parsons, chief technology officer at software design company ThoughtWorks, a pioneering woman in tech whose panel was entitled: "I'm a technologist, not a female technologist."

Ines underlined that at every level, "you must prove yourself much more" as a woman in tech when the overwhelming majority of executives, software writers and engineers are male.

While happy to have made some inroads on the imbalance, Web Summit organisers recognised the work ahead.

"It's a global problem and we are part of this industry," said one of the Irish organisers, Mike Harvey.

"We know that there's much to do, specially on the stages. We scan the whole industry to find female speakers."

© 2016 AFP