



IWD 2023: Why Gender Equity In Tech Matters More Than Ever



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Technology is moving at lightning speed. In my lifetime alone, the world as we know it has orbited into a completely different galaxy from the one, we inhabited before. We're already reflecting on the last two decades as one of the most dramatic periods of transformation in centuries.

The evolution of tech is having an irreversible effect on some of the biggest issues of our day: societal structure; the global workplace; the future of our planet. But tech also has a major role to play in how diverse, equitable and inclusive our communities are. One subject very close to my heart is how to further opportunities for young women in tech, particularly those from diverse backgrounds. I've long believed that by being better, more vocal champions of females in STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math) from a very early age, we can transform these industries – and society at large – for the better.

My journey in STEM

As a young girl growing up in India, science became the pathway for me to find my passion and sharpen a set of skills that would equip me for the future. By the time I reached university, I was studying engineering. As a woman, I was without doubt in a minority set from the beginning. This could easily have been a disadvantage. Instead, being one of only a handful of women taught me to make sure that in a male-dominated environment, my voice could be heard. I had to make sure that the same doors that were open to my male classmates were also being held open for me.

This experience taught me something powerful: the importance of mentorship. Everyone benefits from diverse role models. If mentors in STEM are only male, chances are that stereotypes – especially at such a formative age – will be reinforced. If that happens, gender inequality and unconscious bias win again.

Women must champion – and mentor - women

Mentorship has been a key part of FedEx initiatives to champion women in business across Asia Pacific, the Middle East and Africa. At the height of the pandemic, we set up support systems for female entrepreneurs in India who were at risk of losing the businesses they had built and their ability to provide for their families. Teaming up with community NGO United Way Mumbai, we helped 700 women from low-income groups access the tools and essential support needed to re-start their enterprises and recover. Vulnerable female-led SMEs were among the hardest hit during the pandemic and continue to need help – especially those from low-income communities.

Recently, we've also developed a mentorship and professional skills development program for young female students in the Philippines who aspire to pursue careers in STEM.

Keeping pace with the speed of change

Of course, science and technology roles today are light years away from when I was young. Tech is filled with endless opportunities. Girls aspiring to study STEM fields don't need to be an engineer, scientist, or educator. They can work in AI, robotics, 5G, future mobility, climate research and more. Increasingly, we're seeing tech change lives for the better in sectors like healthcare, helping to cure diseases, increase lifespans and contribute to a healthier society. There's room for blue sky thinking and creativity. There are opportunities to work with data sets that can truly transform how we live and how sustainable our future can be.

Start-ups – built by young founders who are digital natives – are at the forefront of this change. Two out of the four finalists from our 2022 FedEx Small Business Grant Contest – our annual competition to award the most innovative start-ups in Asia Pacific and beyond – were young women working in medtech and a healthcare services enablement platform. Both saw opportunities to launch something that didn't yet exist in the healthcare space, improving lives of patients – and using tech to make the change.

Embracing equity for females everywhere

The tech sector is full of big predictions for our region. In 2023, digital spending is forecast to grow at 3.5x the size of the economy in APAC. With markets across the region competing to be at the forefront of tech product development. We need to be realistic. To make this prediction a reality, we need to address some of the barriers that exist. Digital upskilling. Sourcing the right talent. Identifying the best roadmap for innovation at scale. And the truth is, none of these areas can be brought to full potential if we are not mindful of the gender parity that may exist in our workplaces, schools, labs, and businesses.

One thing's for sure: tech and innovation can be powerful tools to help women achieve gender equality. Technology as a tool or platform is by definition gender-agnostic. If data doesn't discriminate, then nor should we. In a world that's diverse, equitable, and inclusive, the same opportunities must exist for all.