

# Let's all encourage girls to pursue careers in STEM

By [Kelly Lu](#)

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It may seem unlikely to think it now, but I didn't actually start my career studying analytics. I pursued quantity surveying as my first choice of profession. How did you end up in AI then, you ask? Well, as it turned out, I graduated during a period of recession when not much new construction was underway, and it was hard to find a job.



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This prompted me to explore other avenues, which inadvertently led me to my current career in Analytics and AI.

At the time coding was my hobby and passion, which led me to explore possible jobs in this field. It was then that I realised that there is an entire analytics profession that I had previously not known about. It was eye-opening to realise that you can use coding not just to build software, but also to analyse data and find insights that help you understand the world.

I went for it – and I haven't left since.

You may argue that quantity surveying and analytics are not really worlds apart, but while this is true, I had something else

working in my favour that enabled my career shift. I was encouraged as a child to explore STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering & Mathematics) subjects, with a grandfather who enrolled me for an electrical engineering class, where I built things like alarm clocks.

Now in hindsight, it's clear to me that my grandfather was ahead of his time. He pushed me to do all these techy things, and I benefitted greatly from his influence. I was just really lucky to have people in my life that showed me that I can do whatever I want.

I am passionate about encouraging our girls and young women to embrace STEM subjects, and to stick with them. Research shows that girls in primary school outperform their male peers in STEM subjects, but that in their high school years, the number of girls in STEM falls off.

What happens at that stage? It isn't about potential – anyone with a passion for STEM has the chance to keep learning and exploring this wonderful field. Unconscious bias plays a role here – there is a narrative, intended or not – that STEM subjects are better suited to men. Unfortunately, many of the images girls see of scientists, computer scientists and coders in the media are stereotypically male, reinforcing the idea that STEM subjects are 'not for them'.

### **Be conscious**

We really need to embrace active thinking and be conscious about our biases, to reinforce the message that girls can do whatever boys can do. We have to ensure as parents and as people who have influence – teachers and role models – that these girls stay on the STEM trajectory and don't taper off. It's so important for parents to examine their unconscious bias and not steer their girl children away from hobbies and topics like coding, robotics and the like.

The opportunities are not limited to formal schooling. There are so many ways to explore and develop your interest – a plethora of online learning tools are available. I have taken full advantage of the opportunities offered to me by online learning. And while it's hard not to sometimes feel intimidated when starting something brand-new, believing in the process of learning has helped me progress.

There's nothing like figuring out something that you had no idea about, and suddenly it all makes sense. Don't worry about the challenge – as long as you work hard, things will fall into place.

If you haven't tried out STEM, give it a go and try a few courses – you can push yourself to study, and you might end up somewhere completely opposite to where you thought you would. Hands-on experience does so much to dispel the myths around these topics. If, for example, girls can explore coding at school, and realise that it's fun, exciting and creative, it shakes off that mindset that 'this is for someone else'.

Another myth I'd like to dispel is this idea that science and STEM are dry, boring industries to work in. My experience in Analytics and AI has been that I am literally on the bleeding edge of technology, and it's something really exciting to be a part of, because your job is constantly changing. If you're someone who is graduating from university and is worried about a job being mundane or boring, AI is the perfect career for you. We're doing something new every week, and if you slow down, you'll fall behind. It's such a dynamic, ever-changing job.

More women are joining our ranks, and I'm proud to be one of three women in the AI team at SAS South Africa. While there is still much work to be done, I'm encouraged that when I attend meetings and conferences, I see more female faces in the room.

To keep the momentum, parents, educators and influencers must ensure that girls are exposed to opportunities to experiment with STEM subjects and give them the chance to realise that this is something they would enjoy doing for the rest of their lives.

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