

What will it take to enhance the participation of women and girls in space in Africa?

An imbalance in the number of male professionals in space science compared to that of females is the motivating factor in getting more and more women interested in being part of the industry. The number one stumbling block is lack of knowledge about the existence of the industry. The starting point will then be the distribution of adequate information especially to the previously disadvantaged. The media and social media will play an important role in ensuring that information is distributed and reaches the number of desired candidates.

The approach is having career expos that not only include learners but their parents as well as their teachers. The exposure should also not be limited to certain age groups. Different styles of approach and age appropriate information can be presented at different expos hosted for different age groups. This is for the reason that there is very little to no knowledge out there about space science. Parents and teachers as the primary care givers are the first people who introduce the idea of possible careers to the young ones. Their choices over the years have always been limited to becoming teachers, doctors, police officers etc. mainly because they themselves are in the dark about the existence of space science. Equipping them with this information is adding to their career choices.

Accessibility to the information about space science is however inadequate to ensure that more and more females are interested in becoming part of the industry. More so with the masculine image that science as a whole has had over time. This is where now at high school level we introduce Girl Camps that will focus on mentorship for the young ladies provided by the women who already have careers in space science. This will prove to them that it is do able, it is sustainable and the fact that they are highly in demand should add to the advantage.

With the confidence now instilled in the young ladies, to further enhance their willingness to make space science a career choice a fund should be set aside to assist those who show interest in studying for relevant careers in the stream. Support will continue even at tertiary level in mentorship programs to ensure that we produce not only for reducing the gap but the best in the industry.

When this has been achieved, we will then have graduates that claim their existence in space science and thus bridging the gap. The cycle should continue with our graduates now in the forefront of mentorship. All this will not be excluding the male professionals in space science because their motivation will also add to building the confidence of woman in being productive and contributing positively in the sector.

This however will not continue without monitoring the quality of female professionals over the quantity produced. Necessary amendments will be introduced as seen fit to ensure the success of the programme. In trying to break even we would have reached a stage where existence of careers in space science are well known, limited the inhibiting barriers of entry into the field and most importantly remove the masculine image of science not only in this field but in all related fields.

The African continent is well known for its rich and diverse culture, with some of the cultural practices contributing to this low participation of females particularly in the space science. Careful considerations have to be taken into account in making this transition as smooth as possible. Male professionals existing in space science should not be left threatened or unable to accommodate the changes because of certain cultural beliefs. A support system should be in place to assist them in accommodating these changes. After all a productive continent is a rich continent.