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## THE MORE GENDER EQUALITY, THE FEWER WOMEN IN STEM

A new study explores a strange paradox: In countries that empower women, they are less likely to choose math and science professions.

Though their numbers are growing, only 27 percent of all students taking the AP Computer Science exam in the United States are female. The gender gap only grows worse from there: Just 18 percent of American computer-science college degrees go to women. This is in the United States, where girls are taught they can be anything they want to be. [...]

Meanwhile, in Algeria, 41 percent of college graduates in the fields of science, technology, engineering, and math—or “STEM,” as it’s known—are female. There, employment discrimination against women is rife and women are often pressured to make amends with their abusive husbands.[...]

So what explains the tendency for nations that have traditionally *less* gender equality to have *more* women in science and technology than their gender-progressive counterparts do?

According to a paper published in *Psychological Science* by the psychologists Gijssbert Stoet and David Geary, it could have to do with the fact that women in countries with higher gender inequality are simply seeking the clearest possible path to financial freedom. And often, that path leads through STEM professions.[...]

The countries that minted the most female college graduates in fields like science, engineering, or math were also some of the least gender-equal countries. [...]

“Countries with the highest gender equality tend to be welfare states,” they write, “with a high level of social security.” Meanwhile, less gender-equal countries tend to also have less social support for people who, for example, find themselves unemployed. Thus, the authors suggest, girls in those countries might be more inclined to choose STEM professions, since they offer a more certain financial future than, say, painting or writing.[...]

The upshot of this research is neither especially feminist nor especially sad: It’s not that gender equality discourages girls from pursuing science. It’s that it allows them not to if they’re not interested.

The findings will likely seem controversial, since the idea that men and women have different inherent abilities is often used as a reason, by some, to argue we should forget trying to recruit more women into the STEM fields. But, as the University of Wisconsin gender-studies professor Janet Shibley Hyde, put it to me, that’s not quite what’s happening here.

“Some would say that the gender STEM gap occurs not because girls can’t do science, but because they have other alternatives, based on their strengths in verbal skills,” she said. “In wealthy nations, they believe that they have the freedom to pursue those alternatives and not worry so much that they pay less.”