

Foundations of a feminist approach to technology design in computer science

Gendering and de-gendering of computational artefacts

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“Gender studies in computer science” is often understood as addressing the problem of getting more women into IT courses and IT professions. The main task of this approach is to find empirical data or theoretical evidence explaining why there are so few women and how they can be attracted to study and work in computer science. A second strand of research in this field is focussing questions such as: How can computer scientists design IT products for diverse, e.g. female and male users? Do women’s bodies or lives require a different design of meet their requirement? Do women use technology/software in a different way than men? This approach is mostly motivated by economic reasoning, e.g. to attract women as customers and, thereby, extending markets.

The first position rests on the assumption that technology is (gender) neutral. It does not question computational theories, paradigms, methods and products. The second approach has a tendency towards essentialism and, therefore, does not take into account current discussions in gender studies. In my presentation I will argue for a third approach that is geared towards the design of computational artefacts on the basis of constructivist approaches to gender and to technology. I will propose to first scrutinize the processes and mechanisms through which products are gendered, and second to adopt methodologies from critical computing, in order to build “de-gendered” computational artefacts.