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From Girl Leaders to Women Leaders in Science [1]

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On February 11 the world celebrates International Day of Women and Girls in Science. This day, which recognizes the crucial role of women and girls in science and technology, was established in 2016 through a resolution of the United Nations General Assembly. Some of the most relevant points of this resolution, in my opinion, are the promotion of (1) full and equal participation for women and girls, both in their education, as well as their work environment and (2) full participation by women and girls in decision making in science.

This recognition of the fundamental role of girls and women in science arrived quite late in the history of mankind. To give you an idea, the Scientific Revolution (a time period that marked the emergence of modern science was—according to history—led ONLY by men) predominantly occurred between the 16th and 17th centuries. We are in the middle of the 21st century! So, we don't have to be experts to realize that on a global level, girls and women still face countless situations and obstacles that hinder their full participation in education, employment and decision-making in this society.

Now ask yourself: How is the Puerto Rican archipelago doing on this issue? Did you know that in Puerto Rico, unlike the vast majority of countries in the world (including the United States), there is a great interest from girls and young university students towards scientific disciplines? You take a look at the classrooms in the universities around the island. However, there are some very notable exceptions in disciplines such as computer science, physics, mathematics, and some types of engineering, among others. The low participation of girls and young women in these disciplines is clearly reflected in the work and business space in Puerto Rico, where workspaces are dominated by men. Even in disciplines that have been more attractive to girls, you can see some gaps in the retention of women at the professional level and in leadership and decision-making positions.

What needs to change? Frankly, everything. There is no single solution, but one thing I am sure of is that exposing girls to science and motivating them to pursue careers in those fields is NOT enough. While this is and will continue to be very necessary, it is important that we provide girls with tools that allow them to maximize their capacities, beyond knowledge, but in execution. With that in mind, the Seeds of Success (Semillas de Triunfo) Ambassadors Program [3] of Ciencia Puerto Rico, was born. Leading that effort, I have witnessed the potential for impact that girls have. The project has given girls the opportunity to carry out scientific activities, visit laboratories, meet other girls, and dozens of women in science, role models. However, the most important thing, in my opinion, that we have done for them is give them the opportunity to develop and practice leadership skills by doing a science outreach project in their schools or communities. The result today: more than 140 projects that have impacted almost 13,000 people throughout Puerto Rico and hundreds of girls who, after going through this experience, feel more attracted to a scientific career and feel more confident about themselves and the role they can play in science, innovation and entrepreneurship. A CONFIDENT GIRL CAN'T BE STOPPED BY ANYONE. That's why we must continue to pave the way for the girl leaders who will become our women leaders in science.

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