



Tech guru and AI expert, Dr Ruth Stalker-Firth gives WI a fascinating interview on the march of AI and why we should be excited and wary in equal measure. She also argues for more women at the top table in technology or it won't be built for us. Amen to that.

– Jeryl Stone, NFWI Head

WI Life - Ruth Stalker-Firth interview feature

Interview: Rin Hamburg

Photography: Kiki Streitberger

### **“We need more women at the technology table”**

*Dr Ruth Stalker-Firth is a computer scientist and university lecturer who has been working in AI since 1993. She has published over 300 articles on her blog, which gets around 1.2 million visits per year [ruthstalkerfirth.com](https://ruthstalkerfirth.com). A passionate advocate for women’s representation in the technology sector, Ruth gives talks for the WI aimed at demystifying AI and helping us understand what needs to change in order for it to build a fairer future for everyone.*

**I took typing at school because I didn’t think computing had anything to do with me.** It was just another place full of men where I wouldn’t be welcomed. I grew up in the North East during mass unemployment and there were no expectations of me at all, certainly not of me going to university. One day in class, everybody was talking about joining the factory the following year and I thought, "Is that it?" Luckily Educating Rita was on telly that night and I said to myself, "Right, I'm off to uni like Julie."

**I write to help me discover and make sense of my thoughts.** Often my head is full of ideas and I don’t quite know what to do with them so I sit down to write a blog post. And by the end I go, "Oh that’s better!" That’s why I’ve always loved writing. I started my blog almost 20 years ago because I wanted to write about the bits of technology that excite me. It was a complete surprise to find out it was getting around 1.2 million hits a year.

**I believe we all need to be better educated about how AI and machine learning works.** We need to understand why it doesn’t get things right, that it’s just a tool - predictive text on steroids. AI doesn’t fix itself or write itself or update itself. It is highly designed and takes hundreds of people to write, train, update, maintain and improve it. When you interact with ChatGPT, it goes and reads the exchanges it has already had with you, and then generates words that are appropriate, which is why it feels like it’s updating itself. But it isn’t.

**Understanding how our technology works is key to making us all happier.** We lose hours of our days frustrated by badly designed software. There needs to be more transparency. If there’s a mismatch between what people are expecting and what they get - and it’s not clear why - then they won’t trust it and, if they have a choice, they won’t use it. There’s a technical debt of badly designed systems that has built up and AI won’t sort it out.

**The idea that AI will be able to surpass human intelligence is a fantasy.** We love the idea of it - the ghost in the machine. It’s such a great story. But ChatGPT is not going to come and save us. AI follows a boom and bust cycle. It started in the 1950s with the Turing Test and the first neural network. Today, with generative AI, it’s a hot ticket again but it’s a lot like the

scramble to get online in the early 2000s. Back then, getting a website was hailed as the answer to most problems. Now AI is being sold as the same thing.

**Introducing any new software is a political act.** The minute you change the way people work, you change the way society works. If you change the way society works, that is a political act. We need to sit down and have proper conversations about what any technological system is doing. Why are we using it? What are the advantages? Unfortunately, people often make these decisions based on economics, and sometimes it's cheaper to get people to do bad jobs in call centres than to implement a system properly.

**AI is a mirror of society.** The data that has been used to train it contains all of the human prejudices that exist there. Microsoft once put a bot called Tay on Twitter and had to take it down within 16 hours because it was racist, sexist, all the prejudices.

OpenAI didn't want to make the same mistake with ChatGPT so they sent all their data to a call centre in Kenya, where human beings had to sift through the worst content you can see on the internet and filter it out. It's like in the 18th century when you would have poor people literally shovelling horse manure off the streets so the wealthy wouldn't have to see it. Except worse, because a lot of those people in Kenya ended up with PTSD and flashbacks from the things they had to see.

**When I asked ChatGPT to generate an image of the WI it gave me old ladies drinking tea.** For my talk 'When women were computers', I asked it to give me a picture of a group of women and they were all white. If you ask it to draw an IT team, there are no women. AI is trained on data produced by people, with all of our prejudices and old patterns of thinking. And because traditionally throughout history women and people of colour haven't had a voice or have been written out of history, they're not being properly represented by technology.

**We need more women at the technology table otherwise it won't be built for us.** It's the same with so many things. I'm a five foot left-handed woman and I can't reach the top shelf in the supermarket. All of the gadgets I ever use, they're never designed with me in mind.

And now with the popularisation of virtual reality, if I use Oculus headgear, I have no choice but to experience the world as a six-foot man and it makes me dizzy. When I first worked with VR back in the last century, the idea was to calculate the point of view on the fly from the camera angle. However, that involves a lot of recalculation so instead, we just see the world in a second hand view almost like a prefilmed video of a man's point of view.

**Women are on the triple shift.** In the majority of cases we do the housework, the cleaning. We do the emotional heavy lifting of any conversation. We've got the career, we've got the home life, we've got the raising of society. 85% of all volunteers are female. And yet technology is primarily being created by men who have no idea of how the rest of society functions. This is a stereotype, of course, but it's based in reality.

**We still measure intelligence by reductive, academic standards.** We say a computer is intelligent because it can do maths and play chess. But what about emotional intelligence? What about the awareness of other people in the room? And holding space and behaving appropriately and creating inclusive environments? It's easy to program chess or maths - they're reductive systems that simplify problems. The real world is much messier and harder to pin down.

**Women bring all of our human experience to our jobs.** Ada Lovelace invented computer programming because she saw that we could make a computer repeat actions like the looms women used to weave with.

Margaret Hamilton recommended NASA build redundancy failsafes into the moon landing computer because she was watching her daughter play with a flight simulator and she realised that in a stressful emergency situation, astronauts might press the wrong button. NASA told her that the astronauts were highly trained and would never make mistakes, which of course they did. Thankfully, because she had seen how the errors occurred, she was able to fix them and ensure the moon landing was a success.

**It was a woman who made computers speak English.** Grace Hopper was told categorically that computers do not speak English but she wrote a compiler to get it to translate 1s and 0s into English so that everyone could use them. That's a female perspective.

**We need to go back to designing technology for people.** There are clear principles about how to design good software, they've been around since the 1980s. But what happened was that the idea of 'user experience' tipped over into marketing. If we could just go back to the idea that we're designing this technology for people - not for clickbait, not for promotions, not for sales, not to con people - if we could just go back to honest, open conversations, then our technology could be designed better, to support people as they do tasks in a collaborative experience. And we'd all be happier with it.

**I joined the WI in 2022 because I realised I needed more female friends.** Having always worked in male dominated environments, there was very little chance of meeting other women that way. I didn't connect with a lot of women on the school run either. That was partly because of various family health challenges we were going through at the time which meant I just didn't have the capacity, but also because a lot of the mums went straight back to work and had nannies doing the childrearing. Now I've got some lovely friends that I've met through the WI.

**Women make up 51% of the population.** If society doesn't recognise our contribution, how can it claim to be diverse and inclusive?

**You have to see it to be it, that's the saying.** If you don't see yourself in technology, if you don't see yourself on television, then it's harder to be all you can be. Just think, if I hadn't seen Educating Rita that day, I may never have gone to university. We need AI to represent all of us and that means training it on the right data. That's why we need everyone to tell their stories.

INSPIRING WOMAN

**We need more women at the technology table, otherwise it won't be built for us.** It's the same with so many things. I'm a five-foot, left handed woman and I can't reach the top shelf in the supermarket. All the gadgets I ever use, they're never designed with me in mind.

And now with the popularisation of virtual reality, if I use Oculus headgear, I have no choice but to experience the world as a six-foot man and it makes me dizzy. When I first worked with VR back in the last century, the idea was to calculate the point of view on the fly from the camera angle. However, that involves a lot of recalculation so instead, we just see the world in a secondhand view almost like a pre-filmed video of a man's point of view.

**Women are on the triple shift.** In the majority of cases, we do the housework, the cleaning. We do the emotional heavy lifting of any conversation. We've got the career, we've got the home life, we've got the raising of society. And we know that most volunteers are female. And yet technology is primarily being created by men who have no idea of how the rest of society functions. This is a stereotype, of course, but it's based in reality.

**We still measure intelligence by reductive, academic standards.** We say a computer is intelligent because it can do maths and play chess. But what about emotional intelligence? What about the awareness of other people in the room? And what about holding space and behaving appropriately and creating inclusive environments? It's easy to program chess or maths - they're reductive systems that simplify problems. The real world is much messier and harder to pin down.

**Women bring all our human experience to our jobs.** Ada Lovelace invented computer programming because she saw that we could make a computer repeat actions like the looms women used to weave with.

Margaret Hamilton recommended NASA build redundancy failsafes into the moon landing computer because she was watching her daughter play with a flight simulator and she realised that in a stressful emergency situation, astronauts might press the wrong button. NASA told her that the astronauts were highly trained and would never make mistakes, which of course they did. Thankfully, because she had seen how the errors occurred, she was able to fix them and ensure the moon landing was a success.

**It was a woman who made computers**

8 WI LIFE FEBRUARY 2026



*'Women bring all of our human experience to our jobs'*

Computer scientist and university lecturer Ruth, pictured at the British Library

**speak English.** Grace Hopper was told categorically that computers do not speak English but she wrote a compiler to get it to translate 1s and 0s into English so that everyone could use them. That's a female perspective.

**We need to go back to designing technology for people.** There are clear principles about how to design good software - they've been around since the 1980s. But what happened was that the idea of 'user experience' tipped over into marketing. If we could just go back to the idea that we're designing this technology for people - not for clickbait, not for promotions, not for sales, not to con people - if we could just go back to honest, open conversations, then our technology could be designed better, to support people as they do tasks in a collaborative experience. And we'd all be happier with it.

**I joined Gothic Valley WI, Middlesex Federation in 2022 because I realised I needed more female friends.** Having always worked in male-dominated environments, there was very little chance of meeting other

women that way. I didn't connect with a lot of women on the school run, either. That was partly because of various family health challenges we were going through at the time which meant I just didn't have the capacity, but also because a lot of the mums went straight back to work and had nannies doing the child-rearing. Now I've got some lovely friends that I've met through the WI.

**Women make up 50% of the population.** If society doesn't recognise our contribution, how can it claim to be diverse and inclusive? You have to see it to be it, that's the saying. If you don't see yourself in technology, if you don't see yourself on television, then it's harder to be all you can be. Just think, if I hadn't seen *Educating Rita* that day, I may never have gone to university. We need AI to represent all of us and that means training it on the right data. That's why we need everyone to tell their stories.

\* Dr Ruth Stalker-Firth is a member of Gothic Valley WI, Middlesex Federation  
 \* Read more from Ruth at [ruthstalkerfirth.com](http://ruthstalkerfirth.com)