Diversity Statement

I was born in Belgium from a Croatian family. My grandfather and father both emigrated from Croatia in search of better opportunities to support their families. Thus, I was raised in a mix of Western Europe and Slavic cultures. I also had the chance to grow up in a very multicultural city (Liège), because massive immigration waves occurred in South Belgium in the second half of the 20th century. Having Italian, Polish or Albanian colleagues at school was common and from a very young age I was surrounded by a diversity of cultures and lifestyles. Xenophobia and racism issues were heavily discussed in my family, and my parents made a point in teaching me and my siblings about tolerance and justice.

Later in life, as I started my bachelor in Physics, I sometimes faced discrimination on the basis of gender. It was paternalism, or outdated sexist “jokes”, or simply the shocking absence of women at any power positions at the Faculty of Sciences. I already knew the struggle of being a woman in a patriarcal society, but I somehow thought that Academia would be a safer space. I remember my female teacher of “Physics History” telling us that more and more women were earning doctorates in STEM fields, but they were poorly represented higher in the Academia hierarchy. “Where do women go?” she asked us. She is one of the few women I met during my college years that addressed the problem of sexism and racism in Academia. She is also one of the few successful females from my University that I could look up to. I decided to pursue a doctorate after a long discussion with her on my oral exam day. I was also lucky to find a PhD advisor that treated me fairly and always supported me when I was doubting about my next career steps. When I started my postdoc, I moved to the United States and met my new mentor, who encouraged me to silence the imposter syndrome that is so present among people from minorities. At the University of Kentucky, I heard of the WIMS (Women In Medicine and Science) program in 2020. I attended 2 annual WIMS Days, multiple webinars, and I joined the 2021 WIMS mentoring Program, where I was paired with a graduate student that I met on a regular basis for a year. Initiatives that connect and promote women in research are deeply valuable, because they show that we exist, that we are represented, and that we pave the way to a more diverse community in academia.

As a Faculty member at UW, I want to join those kind of programs (such as the WiSe - Women in Science and Engineering- Program), and reach out to any resource that contributes to cultural and policy change, such as AW ADVANCE. As a white person, I know that I cannot suffer from racism and I am fully aware of my privileges. I know that it takes a permanent and active work to address one’s own discriminative bias. This is why I am also committing to continuously educate myself and reach out to resources such as the ones offered by the Office of Minority Affairs and Diversity. I want to create a safe work environment to make sure that any trainee feels welcome, in disregard of their race, gender or sexual orientation.

When interviewed in 1983, the former French Minister of Culture, Françoise Giroud, said “We will truly achieve gender equality the day we will elect an incompetent woman to an important position”. While provocative, I think this statement captures a problem that still persists to this day. We should not ask women (or people from minorities) to prove that they are competent enough to belong in Academia. But we need to dismantle the sexist and racist heritage that is rooted in our western societies. This is one of my deepest certitude.