

DIVERSITY STATEMENT

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I grew up in a multi-cultural community in Sri Lanka that embraced different religions and languages. When the 2004 Indian ocean tsunami hit and devastated much of the island nation, many of the undergraduate students at the university, including myself, from various backgrounds, ethnic groups, and skill levels grouped to develop what would be known as the very first disaster management software, called Sahana (“relief”)¹. The rapid collaborative development of the software to quickly address a pretty miserable solution was an incredibly fulfilling experience that gave us, a diverse group of individuals, a sense of purpose at a highly troubling time. It demonstrated the full potential of diverse teams.

In fact, in my nearly 20 years of education, academic, industry, and research career, I have directly observed the many ways that diverse individuals make teams stronger. My interest in computer science, and the fact that I am an international female student, have always placed me in the minority group in the classes and groups I have been a part of. However, I have been very fortunate to work alongside talented, creative, insightful, kind, and understanding friends, co-workers, students, and faculty to solve complex problems. I have been inspired by the tenacity and honesty of my team members, who maintain deep commitments to diversity and inclusivity.

While at MIT as a graduate student, I taught introductory computer science topics in the MIT Women’s Technology Program and participated in the MIT Women’s Initiative. In both the programs, I instructed high school female students to make Science Technology Engineering and Math (STEM) more attractive. This experience was extremely gratifying, as I later learned that many of the students majored in computer science in college, and some of them even went on to do PhDs in computer science. Furthermore, I was the president of the GW6 - Graduate Women in Course 6 (Electrical Engineering and Computer Science). During my tenure as the GW6 president, I organized many outreach activities for the graduate women in the department, including career panels and social activities (hiking, kayaking, painting, sushi rolling) that enabled women students to bond with each other outside of their research labs.

As I rise to more leadership roles, I have been striving to put myself in the shoes of those around me to ensure their voices are heard and concerns addressed. I embrace our unique strengths: race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender, socio-economic status, age, ability, religious or political beliefs, or other ideologies. I tell the students I teach and mentor, “If you see something that does not feel right, I am here to listen to you.” By doing that, I make sure that they can come to me when they need someone to listen to their concerns. I also try to do the same with my colleagues. I strive to address my students and colleagues using their preferred pronouns (he/she/they/we) inside the classroom, office, and in meetings. I am mindful of any comments that may come up in discussions deemed insensitive and take any corrective action if such incidents occur.

Over the past five years, I have been organizing various events, including conferences, symposia, workshops, and journal special issues. I am amazed at how successful these events are when there is a balanced, diverse representation among the speakers and the editorial board members. Interestingly, I find that there is not much effort needed in recruiting a diverse team for these events, as diverse individuals bring complementary skills, and as such, they are well-known in the research community.

I secured funding (\$20,000) from the NSF to support US-based PhD student authors, predominantly minority and underrepresented student authors, to attend the International Semantic Web Conference (ISWC) 2019, held in Auckland, New Zealand. Without the grant I received, many US-based students would not have been able to attend the conference. I also organized a mentorship lunch for those PhD students at the conference to discuss various issues, including career prospects and diversity, where senior researchers from the community imparted their wisdom in a casual setting. I am the PhD symposium chair of the ISWC 2022, and the symposium I am planning will focus on a panel discussion on career development advice for minority student groups. Furthermore, I organized a trip to Washington DC for five graduate women at RPI to participate in a hackathon organized by the National Library of Medicine in 2019. The event enabled the students to network with other like-minded female researchers, and all of them mentioned that it was a very positive experience personally and academically.

My past efforts demonstrate how I have been striving to achieve diversity around me. My current efforts continue to reflect my commitment to enhancing diversity, equity, and inclusion. Looking ahead to my new role as a faculty member, I intend to use my training, skills, and position to ensure excellence and increase equity and diversity at the university and beyond, and be an exemplar to the future generation of computer scientists.

¹<https://sahanafoundation.org/about-us/history>