

Diversity Statement

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For me, diversity means embracing human differences. I believe in equal opportunity for everyone, irrespective of their race, gender, nationality, physical ability, or social status. Throughout my research and life experiences across Asia and North America, I have come to know how empowering diversity can be and the benefits it provides not only to an individual but also to society. In my philosophy toward life, work ethics, and research methods, I practice diversity as a core principle that defines who I am and what I pursue in life.

Family and Friends. I was introduced to why diversity is important through my family. As a member of a joint family, I grew up with my cousin who had a hearing disability. At a young age, I was taught to respect people's differences and how having a disability does not devalue a person, as proven by my cousin, who continued to be the top student in her class and went on to become a designer. In college, my best friend was a paraplegic and used a wheelchair for mobility. That did not stop him from trekking mountains, visiting beaches, or becoming one of the best programmers in my country. I was born and raised in Bangladesh, a small but proud nation in South Asia. Bangladesh struggles with overpopulation, pollution, and poverty and the limited resources dictate a competitive nature where disability is a massive disadvantage in achieving life goals. I am privileged to be surrounded by these amazing people whose indomitable spirits could not be caged and I will forever be inspired by their courage and dedication that proves that being different does not being at a disadvantage.

Early Research. The inspiration I got from my family and friends led me to pursue research in computing for common good. Early in my research career, I focused on developing computational approaches to support the deaf and hard-of-hearing community by building computer vision-based tools and techniques for accurate hand gesture recognition. This research led to applications of Bangla hand gestures to text translation that could be used as a channel for the deaf and hard-of-hearing community to communicate with others and vice versa.

Coming to America. When I came to the US for my Ph.D. degree, I was embraced by the diverse UMass Amherst community full of international students from all over the world. I was introduced to another range of diversity here with faculties, peers, and the local population from many different countries of origin, gender identities, sexual orientations, life choices, and philosophies. I quickly adapted to this new environment and continued to focus on my research on computing for common good. For my interdisciplinary research, I have had the opportunity to work with a diverse group of mentors and connect with the underrepresented and underserved communities, especially BIPOC and ESL communities. These connections and relationships formed the foundation of my research to build equitable and inclusive data collection and analysis methods to provide a voice to silent populations in search of a way to speak up and be accounted for in critical policy decisions.

Research at UMass Amherst. During my Ph.D. at UMass Amherst, I have closely collaborated with people from 16 different countries across 5 continents. I have also worked with and led all-female teams. Arguably the best team I ever had the honor of leading consisted of an American programmer, an Egyptian web developer, a Chinese designer, and an Indian data analyst. All of them were female undergraduate seniors majoring in Computer Science, Informatics, Design, and Psychology. All of them brought unique perspectives to the project and our combined efforts culminated in a strong system deployed in collaboration with the town of Amherst to engage people in online town halls during the COVID-19 pandemic when face-to-face meetings were impossible. Through working with these teams, my advisor — who is one of the best early career HCI researchers and a woman in Computer Science, and other collaborators from different backgrounds and cultures, I have learned how research and life in general, can be approached from different perspectives. I incorporated their wisdom, teachings, perspectives, and differences into my work and viewpoint in education, research, and life choices.

Diversity Plan. Having experienced first-hand how powerful diversity of opinions and inclusion of different viewpoints can strengthen a team, I will incorporate the same ideas in my research group. As a practitioner of interdisciplinary research, the importance of diversifying the research group is paramount. I will recruit students from diverse backgrounds and establish collaborations with colleagues and peers across a variety of domains to combine our research strengths to pursue advances in computing for common good research. Beyond my group, I will actively advocate for diversity and inclusion in admitting and recruiting students across the institution and promote interdisciplinary projects and research. I am confident that with my own experiences, principles, work ethics, and practices, I will be able to lead by example in incorporating diversity and providing equal opportunity to people from all races, gender, ethnicity, nationality, and background.