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Diversity Statement

It didn't dawn on me until the first year of engineering school at Delhi Technological University back in India that there were significantly fewer women than there were in high school. I attended a fancy private school, Amity International, where the gender ratio was quite healthy. And the problem was not just that there were probably 3 girls to every 60 boys, which is shuddering to even think about, but also that in most Indian colleges, this issue goes mostly unnoticed. Coming to the US, getting my masters and Ph.D., and now doing a postdoc, I noticed the same gender ratio problem, just not as drastic. The only difference is that there is an active movement to combat society's inherent imbalances; not just imbalances in the gender ratio, but imbalances stemming from inequalities in other URMs like the LGBTQ+ community. I myself participated in many such initiatives like AI4ALL, organized by the Iribe Initiative for Inclusion and Diversity in Computing at the University of Maryland. I thoroughly enjoyed my experiences of engaging with students from various backgrounds. Their curiosity and talent continues to amaze me and strengthens my belief to further devote my time towards such initiatives.

While it took me some time to become fully aware of the importance of diversity, I experienced lack of inclusivity as early as middle school. An unfortunate case of bullying led me to quit a robotics club that I was a part of, creating a feeling of not being good enough for engineering-oriented disciplines. Eventually, I overcame this feeling, but I understand the long-lasting effects that missed opportunities can have on one's career. I want to ensure that students do not have to go through similar experiences.

Therefore, I am dedicated to fostering diversity and inclusion in my surroundings. Personally, I believe that to counter the lack of DEI in technical fields, we must focus on early education levels, as by the time students reach college, it is often too late. Combining my passion for teaching, expertise in robotics and AI, and my determination to enhance the representation of underrepresented minorities in technology, I have chosen to actively participate in and organize outreach activities at UMD and UT Austin. These efforts include delivering guest lectures on self-driving vehicles, volunteering in campus-wide events, organizing robotics-related activities, and teaching short courses on AI. For instance, during the Robotics Summer Camp 2023 at UT Austin, I had the privilege of showcasing autonomous mobile robot navigation to a diverse group of high school and middle school students. My aim was to inspire and encourage their interest in robotics, regardless of their gender, ethnicity, or socioeconomic background.

At the International Science and Engineering Fair 2023, I served as a judge for the special awards category for AAAI. By evaluating the work of high school students from around the world, I recognized and celebrated their achievements, ensuring equal opportunities for all participants to access awards and scholarships. Volunteering for STEM Girl Day on the UT Austin Campus allowed me to contribute to a nationally recognized event that encourages girls from grades K-8 to explore STEM fields. By hosting hands-on activities and sharing my experiences as a scientist and engineer, I sought to empower young girls and foster their interest in STEM subjects. Participating in the Future Leaders in Robotics and AI: Celebrating Diversity and Innovation Seminar Series, I supported the University of Maryland and Microsoft Robotics and Diversity Initiative. This nationwide online seminar series focuses on showcasing the latest research and innovation in robotics and AI while providing mentorship and networking opportunities for underrepresented minorities and women pursuing PhD studies or postdoctoral research. Furthermore, I have actively engaged in educational programs such as AI4ALL and NYU AI School. In these programs, I taught machine learning and programming to high school students, particularly those from underrepresented minorities. By guiding them and discussing career paths in machine learning research, I aimed to break down barriers and empower individuals to pursue their interests and aspirations. In all these endeavors, my objective has been to create an inclusive environment where diversity is celebrated, equality is upheld, and everyone feels valued and supported. I strongly believe that diversity drives innovation and that equal access to opportunities is essential for the advancement of science and technology. I will continue to advocate for diversity, equality, and inclusion in all aspects of my work to contribute to a more equitable and vibrant future.

Moving forward, as a faculty member, in addition to keeping up with outreach activities such as those that are equivalent to the I4C initiative at UMD or robotics camps planned by Texas Robotics, I plan to maintain a respectful and inclusive culture in my classroom and research group. Diversity and independent thinking will be encouraged. In particular, I will provide accessible video lectures and host open office hours for students of any background to discuss matters they would otherwise be unable to talk about with their peers, advisors, or departments. Next, within my research group, I will lead team building exercises such as inviting the entire group on "paper deadline nights" with lots of pizza. This was something I experienced during my own grad school experience and driving back home with everyone at 3 am still forms a core part of my fondest memories. I will also host weekly board game nights. Additionally, I will seek partnerships and collaborations with like-minded organizations and institutions to expand our impact and work towards common goals. Through mentorship programs, seminars, and initiatives, I will actively support underrepresented minorities and women, offering guidance and advocating for their representation and advancement in robotics and AI. By taking these focused actions, I aim to make a lasting impact and contribute to a more equitable and vibrant future for all individuals in the field. Together, we can drive meaningful change and create a diverse and inclusive academic environment that empowers and celebrates the contributions of every individual.