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Achieving Gender Equity: ACM-W Can't Do It Alone

THE APRIL 2017 edition of *Communications* included an editorial from ACM-W on the status of gender diversity in computing and the painstakingly slow progress being made toward an equitable representation of women in our discipline. In that editorial, Valerie Barr highlighted ACM's commitment to diversity more generally via a new ACM Council on Diversity. Work on the establishment of this Council is continuing and ACM-W looks forward to being a part of this broader effort.

In the interim, our work on behalf of women in computing continues in earnest. Since the beginning of 2017, there have been 26 new ACM-W Student Chapters chartered. During the 2017–2018 academic year, a record 29 Celebrations of Women in Computing are being held in locations all over the world. Our connections to ACM SIGs and partner organizations outside of ACM are strengthening. We recently endorsed important legislation pending in the U.S. Congress that holds promise to increase computing education to girls in the elementary grades.^a With several other professional organizations in science and mathematics, ACM-W is participating in a three-year project to gather significant and currently unavailable global data about women's participation in our disciplines.^b

I could fill this column with more examples of the work of our many dedicated ACM-W volunteers, but I think it is important to focus a bit on

a nagging question that many of us who work so hard in this space of gender equity in computing have. Why, with so much sustained effort by so many individuals and organizations, is progress toward gender equity so slow?

Of course, if there was a known answer to this question we would not still be asking it. We know that ultimately there must be significant systemic change on many fronts including pre-tertiary education, workplace environment, and societal perception of computing professionals. Systemic change is difficult work that can take many years to realize. Systemic change will not be achieved if responsibility for realizing gender equity is viewed as belonging to the women in computing or the many organizations whose primary focus is gender equity. The change will occur only when every individual computing professional accepts responsibility for making it happen.

ACM as an organization impacts our profession through the individual and collective work of its membership. In order for ACM to have a bigger influence on the state of gender equity in computing, every ACM member, regardless of gender, must do her or his part to understand the problem, create inclusive environments, speak out on issues that impact the experience of women in computing, and advocate for social change that will turn the tide long-term. Individual investment in the work of gender diversity will transform the special interest groups, chapters, and conferences of ACM in ways that will redefine our external image and expand our ability to influence societal change.

So what can an individual do on a daily basis to ensure her/his environment fosters inclusiveness? I posed this question out to a few members of the ACM-W Council and received lots of good suggestions. Here are just a few of them:

- Once a month become familiar with at least one woman in your office or on your campus that you do not know and then introduce them to your peers.

- Read about unconscious bias and stereotype threat so that you can recognize these things when they occur and speak out against them.

- Ensure that original ideas are attributed to the first person (not the first male) to make the suggestion.

- Say a few sincere, kind words to a female colleague regarding her work.

There were many more great ideas generated and I am confident the ACM community has even more to offer. I invite you to read a recent blog post (<https://cacm.acm.org/blogs/blog-cacm/224005>) and contribute your own strategies for supporting women in computing in the workplace.

ACM has the potential to set the standard for what it means to be an organization committed to solving issues of gender diversity in computing. It may even be possible that a day will come when ACM-W will no longer need to exist. Until then, ACM-W will continue to engage in activities that support, celebrate, and advocate for women in computing and we welcome all who will join with us.

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^a Press release of this legislation can be found at <http://bit.ly/2uNf1gA>.

^b The Gender Gap in Science project can be followed at <https://icsugendergapinscience.org/>.