

Report on Women in IR (WIR 2021) at SIGIR 2021

Nazli Goharian
IR Lab, Georgetown University
nazli@ir.cs.georgetown.edu

Hannah Bast
University of Freiburg
bast@cs.uni-freiburg.de

Abstract

The SIGIR'21 Women in IR event ¹, co-organized by SIGIR WIR co-chairs, Nazli Goharian (US East Coast) and Hannah Bast (Central Europe), took place on July 13-14 and was attended by ~70 participants. Due to Covid-19, SIGIR'21 was held online. To accommodate all the time zones, we organized two sessions (A and B) on the same topics. Session A, which was scheduled at a good time for the US and Europe, was well attended by around 52 participants. Session B, which was aimed for Asia-Pacific, had only around 15 participants, where several already attended the earlier session. The low attendance of Session B caused a significant delay in the start of the session which impacted negatively the session due to the very late / middle of night of the organizers physical location. This year's theme was **"Community Engagement & Influence"** covering two topics: 1. Gender pay disparity and the community feedback and input which were captured via a survey and presented during the session, and 2. A presentation and discussion on the notion of hero culture.

Date: 13-14 July, 2021.

This year we had decided not to have panelists as we believed that the wonderful group of 19 WIR panelists in 2020 ² which had covered both academia and industry had fruitful discussions on the topics of disparities in pay and in leadership roles. We hence decided to go to the community and get their feedback and input on various questions prior to the SIGIR conference so that we can provide the statistics and discussions during the WIR sessions. We distributed a survey ³ through the SIGIRLIST to the community to collect anonymously responses about the status of their organizations concerning pay transparency, gender pay gap, participants interest in finding out, and the community's interest in leadership workshops. Survey findings are presented below. In the sessions, preliminary survey results were presented.

Gender Pay Inequity and the Survey. Nazli Goharian provided a short summary of the WIR'20 report [Goharian et al., 2020] on the publicly available statistics and reports on the gender pay inequity both in academia and industry. Then she provided some successful examples where faculty pressure led the administration to take the steps to rectify this disparity in their

¹<https://sigir.org/women-in-ir/sigir2021.html>

²<https://sigir.org/women-in-ir/sigir2020-announcement.html>

³<https://docs.google.com/forms/d/1j38QbZPw-xDG4DdrxCKJvW1ydeUQ7XgbWsiNjwe9VWI/edit>

institutions. The statistics based on the responses to the survey were then presented. By the day of the event, 65 responses were received. The findings based on these responses were presented in the sessions. Additional responses received after the event, totaling 74, are reflected in this report. 72.9% of the respondents indicated that their institution's type was a public university, a government institution, or a public research lab (we refer to these as *public sectors* in this report); the remaining 27.1% are from a private university or industry (we refer to these as *private sectors* in this report). To the question of whether there is salary transparency in their institutions, 28.4% indicated a lack of salary transparency (33.3% from public sectors; 66.7% from private sectors); 55.4% indicated there was salary transparency (90.2% from public sectors; 9.8% from the private sectors). Out of all the respondents, 16.2% indicated they did not know if there was or was not salary transparency in their institutions (83.3% from public sectors; 16.7% from the private sectors). From those in the public sectors who responded to the question of salary transparency, 13.0% believed there was no transparency, 68.5% indicated there was salary transparency and 18.5% did not know. On the other hand, the distribution is different in the private sector, as 70% responded that there is a lack of salary transparency in their institution, 20% responded there was transparency, and 10% did not know. To the question of whether based on their knowledge about the salaries at their institutions do they see a gender pay gap (same rank, position, and discipline) in their institutions, 70 responses were received. From the public sector respondents 64.7% indicated no gender pay gap, 11.8% indicated existence of gender pay gap in their institutions, and 23.5% indicated they did not know. From the private sector respondents, however, the same percentage of 31.6% indicated the absence and presence of gender based pay gap in their institutions; 36.8% did not know. We further asked our respondents, if they were willing to raise the issue of gender pay gap with their administration and Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) offices. About 10% indicated they already have done that, over 13% indicated that they will do that, about 40% indicated that they will think about it, and about 25% indicated they will not do that; the remaining cases indicated that others have done that or they do not see any gap. Although these statistics are based on a small number (74) of respondents from our SIGIR community, and hence, not statistically reliable, it raised an important question in our community, regardless of gender, geographical location, and seniority. We encouraged the community to demand their institutions to answer if women are equally compensated as men for the same job/title/rank/discipline in their institution; make the statistics public and devise plans to rectify in a timely manner any discrepancies, if they exist.

Hero Culture. Hannah Bast gave a presentation on *Hero Culture* and its prevalence in (computer) science and its impact on diversity and women. The following aspects were covered:

1. There is a tendency to attribute achievements to individuals (for example, “Tim Berners-Lee, the father of the World Wide Web“). However, scientific progress is much more collective in nature and the big transforming inventions are often “in the air“. Also, the attribution of inventions to inventors is often wrong; this is known as Stigler’s Law.
2. There is a strong ambition in the field to be *first* in something. Being first has a strong impact on measures like citation counts and is important for one’s career. However, humanity or science as a whole does not really care about who was first. On the contrary, an exaggerated ambition to be first can lead to ruthless behavior, sloppy work, and sometimes even fraud.
3. Awards can play a useful role, in particular for young researchers, to highlight important

contributions, or to provide financial support. However, awards are increasingly used to establish a hierarchy. Nobody expects a best-paper award, but if you give awards on many levels (“Fellow”, “Distinguished Member”, etc.) it becomes a statement when you do not get a particular award.

4. The amount of bragging on social media is amazing. Paradoxically, a large part comes from senior researchers who are already well known. It often comes in disguise, like sharing one’s joy about a large number of papers being accepted at a prestigious conference, or posting a ranking that includes oneself while simultaneously belittling the meaning of such rankings.

The question arises: How does all this help science? One way of viewing it is that human are inherently egoistic and if you want progress, you have to appeal to their egos (“greed is good”, “fight for the divas”). Also, singling out individuals, institutions, and conferences, even if arbitrary to some extent, helps us to navigate the information overload of our times.

On the other hand, all of the described phenomena *hurt diversity*. In particular, singling out individuals leads to a “the rich get richer” dynamics, which tends to favor those who are already privileged. Affirmative action is a possible fix for this, but also a strange one, because the root of the problem is not lack of diversity in the distinguished group of “heroes”, but the hero phenomenon in the first place.

Reality is much more multi-dimensional. In particular, nobody is good at everything and not even at most things. We lack a culture of being honest about our strengths and weaknesses. Such honesty would help in allocating the best people for each task. In our current culture, such decisions are often made by status (tasks with high status are allocated to people with high status). This not only hurts diversity, but is also inefficient. For example, just because someone is famous does not mean they are a good speaker, or writer, or PC chair.

A lively discussion ensued. For more information on the topic, see the slides of the presentation at <https://ad.cs.uni-freiburg.de/publications>.

References

Nazli Goharian, Xin Ma, and Suzan Verberne. Women and disparities in leadership and wages. *SIGIR FORUM*, December 2020. URL <https://sigir.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/p12.pdf>.