ACM W India Grad Cohort Workshop 2020 Report- A Virtual Event

ACM-W India emphasizes on women empowerment in computer-related fields and domains. It focuses on providing a platform for sharing resources, information, ideas, and experiences with its diverse range of activities so that women can effectively tackle the challenges in their computing careers. It aims to promote computer literacy and provide strong networking opportunities, enabling women towards being independent, confident, self-reliant, and successful.

The Computing Research Association-Widening Participation (CRA-WP) is an international computing body that started conducting the Grad Cohort workshops from 2004 in the different educational institutions of the USA. Over the last 15 years, these sessions have guided many women through their academic and professional years. Drawing inspiration from it, ACM-W India decided to adopt this workshop model to the Indian setting. As a result, the first edition was organized at IIT Bombay in July 2018 and the second one was held at IIT Delhi in 2019.
ACM India Grad Cohort 2020, the third installment of this pan-India workshop series, was virtually co-organized by the CSE Discipline at IIT Gandhinagar and ACM-W from 24th - 26th July 2020. It kick started with a warm welcome address by Dr. Neeldhara Misra (faculty, IITGN and member, ACM-W), followed by the opening remarks from Dr. Heena Timani (chairperson, ACM-W India)Cofounder and Director, iAnanya Datalytix Pvt.Ltd, Dr. Nutan Limaye (faculty, IIT Bombay and vice-chairperson, ACM-W) and Dr. Meenakshi D'Souza (faculty, IIIT Bangalore). They highlighted that the long term objective is to positively shape the future of our societies by celebrating and advocating women in computing.

On Day 1, the first keynote lecture was delivered by Dr. Sunita Sarawagi (professor at IIT Bombay and the Infosys Prize 2019 winner), during which she talked about the journey of machine learning models, starting from their birth and going all the way to how they are serving the real world in the current times. Although they have an amazing number of applications, a lot more still needs to be done and this is the reason ML continues to be a fascinating area for further research in computing. The next talk was given by Dr. Manik Gupta (faculty, BITS Pilani-Hyderabad), where she provided her perspectives on how women can plan and progress in their computing careers. The key is to embrace womanhood, be focused, work hard, carve our own career paths, and define our own success. In another session, Dr. Bhavana Kanukurthi (faculty, IISc Bangalore) spoke on choosing a research advisor, topic, and group. According to her, the process should be well-planned, align with our skills, and exhibit practical relevance. Dr. Aparna Taneja (software engineer, Google research) described the practical aspects of this topic by sharing experiences and insights from her own thesis and present job responsibility.

Jaya Sreevalsan Nair (faculty, IIIT Bangalore) gave examples of some eminent minds in various fields and discussed the latest topics of online presence and personal branding. She stated that the trick is to maintain a proper combination of one’s online and offline persona. This was followed by a captivating panel discussion that shed light on some aspects of remote working and maintaining a proper work-life balance. The panelists of this session were Dr. Tulika Mitra (Provost’s Chair Professor of Computer Science, National University of Singapore), Dr. Joycee Mekie (faculty, IITGN), Dr. Hemangee Kapoor (faculty, IIT Guwahati), Dr. Rekha Singhal (senior research scientist, TCS) and Dr. Akanksha Agrawal (postdoctoral researcher, Ben-Gurion University, Israel).
Talking about their personal and professional experiences, they motivated the participants and advised them on how to carve their own niche in computer science.

Day 2 opened with the second keynote lecture of this event that was delivered by Dr. Meena Mahajan (professor, Institute of Mathematical Sciences). An eminent contributor in Discrete Algorithms, Complexity Theory, Matching Theory, Combinatorics, and Proof Complexity, she recounted some interesting experiences from her life and expressed that she grew increasingly fond of theoretical computing with time and proceeded to pursue her Ph.D. in this domain. She described some fascinating facets of this field. In her words, every unknown in complexity theory is like a creative puzzle yet to be solved and there is a place for everyone to work in this exciting area of education and research. The next session was given by Dr. Prajakta Nimbhorkar (faculty, Chennai Mathematical Institute), where she discussed the background preparation (breadth and depth) for Ph.D.
Dr. Ranjita Bhagwan (senior principal researcher, Microsoft) talked about confidence and encouragement by narrating some instances from her life and emphasized that failures are our path to success since they teach us how to firmly believe in ourselves and live positively. Akanksha Agrawal gave a session on quantity versus quality in publishing from the viewpoint of research in theoretical computing, and Tulika Mitra highlighted this topic with respect to the early career researcher level, giving examples from systems research. A thought-provoking panel discussion moderated by Dr. Lipika Dey (principal scientist, TCS) included Meena Mahajan, Dr. Uttama Lahiri (faculty, IITGN), and Dr. Arpita Korwar (faculty, IIT Goa) as panelists. They shared their life-journeys and provided quality guidance to the participants on how to cope up positively and effectively with uncertainty and other related challenges. After this, all the participants enjoyed the online screening of an inspirational documentary movie that is based on the life works of Maryam Mirzakhani, the first woman and the first Iranian to win the greatest prize in mathematics, the Fields Medal.
The third and final day of this workshop was initiated with an interactive session by Dr. Sushmita Gupta (faculty, National Institute of Science Education and Research). She discussed whether going for a post-doctorate is really a hit or a miss based on her experiences in theoretical computing. Next in line was a process-oriented talk given by Arpita Korwar, during which she explained the process of managing a job hunt and stated that it is all about constantly and actively being in the game. Richa Singh (faculty, IIT Jodhpur) and Anasua Bhowmik (Fellow Design Engineer, AMD Bangalore) provided valuable guidance on post-Ph.D. career options in the industry and academia respectively.

The ACM India Grad Cohort 2020 offered a perfect place for women in computing to connect with one another via several virtual platforms such as zoom, gather.town, WhatsApp, and social media.

Moreover, it also housed three major contests for women participants, with a chance to win exciting prizes. The last date for entry-submissions was 31st July 2020 and the goodies were sponsored by Tata Consultancy Services. The results
were announced on 10th August 2020 over email, on the event website, and on different social media platforms.

With an attendance of more than 195 registered participants (students, researchers, and leading experts from industry and academia), the workshop was a huge success and concluded on an optimistic note. It proved to be an excellent platform for women in computing and its allied areas to build discussion forums with some of the most eminent minds in this field. Several participants voiced their views on how enriching it was to meet their women role-models. We received very good response of the participants on virtual format of Grad Cohort workshop. Opinion was taken using menti.com.

The next edition of this Grad Cohort will be conducted at IIT Jodhpur, with Dr. Richa Singh being its organizer. Dr. Heena Timani also shared the list of some upcoming interesting ACM India events. In their concluding remarks, Dr. Neeldhara Misra, Dr. Nutan Limaye, and Dr. Meenakshi D'Souza thanked IIT Gandhinagar, ACM-W, Google, TCS, the team of volunteers and all the Participants for massively supporting this event and making it a smashing success. Everyone bid adieu with the promise of staying connected to each other through these events, as a supportive and strong women community in the field of computer science education, research, and industry.