



TREADING THE WATERS OF THE DIVERSITY POOL

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It is winter 2020 and for the first time in recent history, there are more than 75 girls in the freshers batch at IIIT. Discussions ensue over whether their place in the institute is well-deserved. Strike that. The discussions have already begun. The introduction of the diversity pool has been one of the most polarizing decisions in recent times. As questions of female entitlement and ‘undeserved’ assistance pervade our mail chains and forum posts, a conversation about the inception of the Diversity Pool becomes a necessity.

Through this article, we wish to shed some light on the fires that the Diversity Pool will put out - the invisible forces that often restrict women from succeeding in the tech world, whilst also exploring the social stigmas and restrictions that inhibit them from joining it.

Many circumstances referenced in this article may not immediately be relatable to some, but that does not make them any less true. The inability to relate to an experience or incident does not invalidate an argument but rather exposes our lack of awareness of the issue. These experiences may be attributed to being a woman in technology, a student in India, and most importantly, a student at IIIT. Hence, we have to find out for ourselves and work against the structures that systematically limit minorities.

SOCIETAL REFORM

When looking at schemes such as the Diversity pool, it is critical to note the society that necessitates it. It was created as a consequence of societal disparities in India and the broader tech world.

THE INDIAN CONTEXT

ACCESS TO COACHING CENTRES

India is a nation notorious for its mistreatment of women where gruesome incidents against them are commonplace. The instinctive response for most parents in the face of such incidents is to “protect” their children by limiting their interactions and freedom, favouring education that is closer-to-home. This inadvertently affects a girl’s access to education, risking losing out on greater learning opportunities in favour of “safer” options.

A survey of female students at IIIT that wrote the JEE suggested this. Thirty-five female undergraduates who wrote the JEE were surveyed and asked a variety of questions on the coaching centres they attended. Normally this would’ve been a small sample size, but only ~52 girls have entered via the JEE

mode in the past four years! Students were asked if they had ever attended a residential coaching institute, the likes of which are popular in Kota and are a common point of origin for many male IIT students. A mere 4 girls across all the UG batches had attended a residential coaching institute. This is definitely far fewer than the percentage of male students that avail education at Kota. Some reasons they cited were their parents' scepticism for residential institutes and preference for nearby coaching facilities as they did not want their daughters travelling too far. The underlying point here is that when comparing two demographics and their performance on a common exam, we should also compare the equality in access to preparatory material. Girls are not on an equal footing at this front. The Diversity Pool helps alleviate the problem by providing high-quality education to otherwise capable girls that had to settle for less. Arguments that claim women should be treated no differently often ignore the premise that they did not have the same facilities in the first place.

As part of the survey, several students also noted the difficulties of being in a male-dominated classroom. The responses ranged from casual sexism and neglect on the teacher's behalf to a lack of female community. One such response stated that their professor once said: "it doesn't matter if girls do bad anyway they'll end up as wives but boys have no choice that's why they have to do better". Another noted a contrast in the learning process where boys could stay at the institute for longer hours and clear their doubts while they couldn't. Some girls even remarked that they "hated" their coaching institutes due to the awkwardness in interactions and partiality shown by teachers. The dismal number of girls in a class was a common feeling amongst most answers.

Whilst some students did not note any difficulties, the mere existence of the aforementioned issues is a concerning factor. After all, if women are unable to find a conducive learning environment, we cannot expect them to outshine the men who had a better experience.

STIGMA AGAINST WOMEN JOINING TECH

Whilst we have progressed in our thinking, the idea of a female engineer is still foreign in many households. Considered to be "caring" individuals, women outnumber men in sciences such as medicine but still have abysmal numbers in engineering. Even if women didn't have the barrier to a great education, the social stigma against female engineers is enough to suppress the number of women entering the field. In fact, just under a third of all JEE aspirants were girls in Jan 2020¹ and the numbers are often worse in JEE coaching centres (several students noted being just one of 3-4 girls in a class of 50 in the earlier survey). This stigma even limits the amount of expenditure on a girl child's education in some households.

Mindsets cannot be changed instantaneously but increased representation helps aid the process. As the number of women in technology matches those of men, the idea of a woman in tech will become the norm rather than the exception. Measures such as the Diversity Pool help increase these numbers gradually. As more women gain access to better learning opportunities, we break the myth of computer science being a masculine profession. The hope is that a balanced gender ratio is maintained organically in the future, but when the current reality is not as rosy, we need to give a little push.

Following the pool's announcement, many wondered why "grassroot" methods weren't employed in place of the pool. To the institute's credit, several efforts are being made at that level. Admission modes such as SPEC specifically target girls from poorer economic backgrounds (along with integrated program students). Admission fee waivers and relaxed tuition further incentivize reluctant families to fund the girl child's education. As with all benefit programmes, potential misuse is possible but hopefully, the larger result is constructive.

WOMEN IN TECH

Poor access to education is just one facet of the problem though. Globally, women form a minority in the tech industry, and the numbers in India are no better. Just around 34% of the workforce is female as per AnitaB²³, a global non-profit social enterprise. The number of women in executive positions is much worse - just 1%. These numbers may be a consequence of the low number of women pursuing CS streams, but there's more to the story.

Women in tech frequently report mistreatment at their jobs, or

1 <https://www.shiksha.com/engineering/articles/number-of-jee-main-registrations-2020-decline-ews-and-women-applicants-on-the-rise-blogId-24783>

2 <https://anitab.org/blog/indian-women-in-technology-barriers/>

3 <https://www.livemint.com/companies/news/in-india-34-women-are-in-tech-jobs-but-we-at-anitab-org-want-to-take-this-to-50-1569410199742.html>



could do more to help the situation, by promoting girl child education in schools, enabling them to be competitive in entrance examinations. Another solution to this would be imposing a new cutoff for lower income-brackets. This comes with concerns about academic rigour and feasibility. To be fair, the Diversity Pool has barely kicked into effect, and the results are yet to be seen. In a year, armed with data, IIIT will hopefully amend the process to further accommodate the most disadvantaged.

On matters of implementation, a commonly suggested solution is conducting a different exam for girls - along the lines of SPEC. A different mode of admission would not be different in any way though. It too will always feel like a form of reservation. Imagine that the Diversity Pool was a new mode of admission called FASA. Under FASA, these students would write an exam and compete for a limited number of seats - just like DASA. But here, FASA admits and regular JEE admits would belong to the same socio-economic groups. The difference lies only in the gender and the perception that no seats are being taken from boys in JEE. Couldn't some FASA seats be given to the JEE mode? This argument can largely hold for most modes of admissions as well. The Diversity Pool isn't any different from any modes of admission in that sense. No seats are being taken away from the boys; there's a separate 25% "quota" for girls. The Diversity Pool will use JEE, lending the perception of standard reservation. The choice of using JEE is also for the greater good. As the speaker of parliament said⁵, "The JEE reaches out to 11 Lakh students. Implementing another exam would, in fact, just bring down student quality. This itself is one of the 'problems' highlighted by those who oppose the Diversity pool."

Things aren't perfect. It's hard to imagine a perfect system that considers equity in access, income, societal pressures, and more to handpick students. For all the flaws that could be pointed out, the Diversity Pool pushes for a greater female community in tech. That's a good start.

HOW THE DIVERSITY POOL WILL CHANGE IIIT

The diversity channel may have been created to reshape societal structures that discourage women from joining technology but it also stands to reshape dynamics within IIIT. Contrary to popular belief, these reforms are unlikely to dilute the quality of students at IIIT but rather, create a positive and holistic learning environment, whilst sensitizing students about other genders.

A common misconception amongst people is that your JEE rank dictates your professional and personal capabilities for the rest of your life. To all those who have taken the test, we can agree that our performance depends a lot on calming our nerves

5 <https://pingiiit.org/2020/05/the-diversity-pool-interview/>



WHY ARE WOMEN UNDERREPRESENTED IN TECHNOLOGY?

Top 4 answers

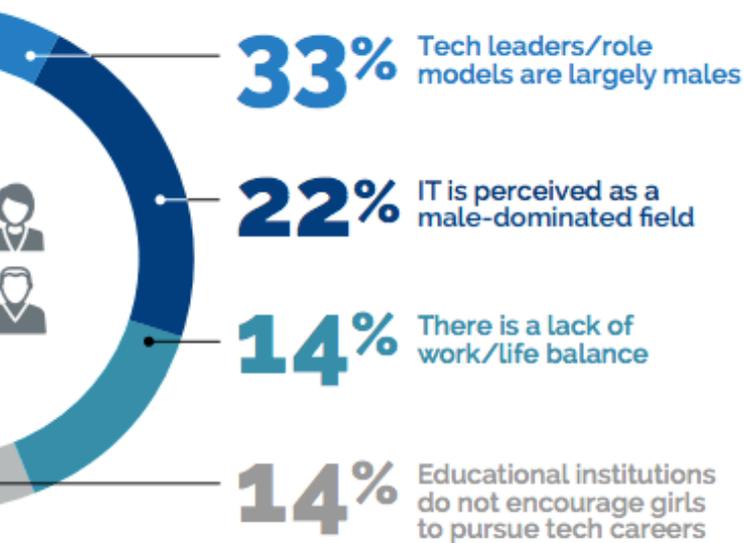
on exam day and also involves a considerable amount of luck. While rank 3,000 and rank 10,000 sound like they are poles apart, they are different just in terms of a mere 4-5 questions.

We have seen proof of this as students with worse JEE ranks perform just as well (and sometimes even better) than their counterparts. The reality is that there is no conclusive correlation between how a person performs in the JEE versus how they fare in college. The inclusion of more girls through a diversity pool does not compromise the credibility or merit of the institute. Rather, it makes us more inclusive and paves way for more female perspective in discussions and deliberations.

IMPACT ON INTERNAL MISOGYNY

Our perception of gender discrimination is generally limited to what we read in the media - loud instances of sexual harassment and the pay gap at workplaces. However, chauvinism is not limited to the higher rungs of the industry as it takes its roots right at the college level, before ballooning into something far more toxic. IIIT itself is not a conducive environment for existing women as misogyny pervades every sphere of our campus life.

Modern sexism is more subtle than labelling women as entirely incapable - at IIIT, it takes the form of attributing a woman's successes to her peers. Women regularly face mental



harassment as their work is belittled and they are labelled manipulative or even cunning for availing any gender-specific opportunity. A recent explosive discussion on IIIT's Facebook group for students evolved into a conversation about lewd comments and humour revolving around these diversity programs. Whatever be your opinion of such schemes, we do believe there is a more fruitful way for the community to debate them, rather than demeaning and degrading an entire gender. The confessions page at IIIT is another instance of unchecked sexualization where unwarranted comments are regularly made about a woman's appearance. More concerning than some of the comments itself is their repeated nature.

Such phenomena breed because of the stark minority of women in the college; whenever anyone speaks up, they are ignored or dismissed. These experiences often leave women feeling uncomfortable and instils in them a fear of being excluded and/or alienated by their male peers. With the lack of representation, comes a lack of apprehension for such issues on campus. Hence, the first step towards building a better community involves diversifying it. Inducting more girls into college can help achieve this as it will dismantle the toxic environment against women and no longer allow for an entire gender to be overshadowed by the majority. As they say 'strength lies in numbers' and that cannot be achieved with the ratio at an exiguous 1:10 figure.

A NEWFOUND COMMUNITY

Critical to every university experience is the community that lets it thrive. The female community at IIIT is rather small and often misses out on diverse viewpoints that larger groups can offer. A significant part of our college life is the discussions and interactions in our hostel rooms but these are severely limited for the girls, owing to their low numbers. These include both informal interactions and intellectual discussions.

There is a lack of precedence for women taking part in many activities such as competitive programming and open-source contributions. The sheer number of boys pursuing it and the absence of visible female role models can be intimidating and overwhelming. This phenomenon has become especially worse in the past few years as there used to be many women GSoC'ers and competitive programmers earlier. The declining participation is likely due to the dwindling gender ratio (IIIT-H actually maintained a healthy gender ratio till 4 years back - it has only worsened recently). Whilst often overlooked, the lack of such a female community is a crucial point of debate. Greater intake can help build a strong and empowered female clique at IIIT. Subsequently, the 'Outsider Syndrome' that plagues women in STEM may be eradicated as they feel a sense of belonging to the larger community, allowing for richer discourse.





RISE WITH A

CONCLUSION

A shortsighted view of the topic may deem the channel unfair and unnecessary, but a deeper analysis highlights the years of discrimination against women in engineering - from the lack of role models, overprotective parents, preference for the education of a male counterpart to mental and physical harassment in work environments, and the outright rejection of the scientific aptitude amongst females.

Including more women in the field not only tackles the societal problem of gender diversity in STEM but also improves the standard of innovation and invention as one cannot quantify the diversity of thought and approach of a female perspective. The best time to increase representation is at the university level when students gain mastery in their subjects.

For an institute that prides itself in its inclusive and progressive nature, we must take proactive efforts to improve the status of women in our college. Whilst all the deep-rooted issues surrounding gender inequality in STEM cannot be changed overnight, the Diversity Pool is a step in the right direction. We cannot wait around for mindsets and perspectives regarding

women to change organically and must take immediate and dynamic measures that destroy such sexist structures.

The Diversity Pool is neither the definitive answer nor the damnable evil - it is just a step in the right direction. If executed well, a balanced gender ratio will be maintained naturally in the future, without the need for targeted schemes. Rather than nitpicking over fine details and finding faults with the institute, it is high time we rally behind the pool, help make IIIT an all-inclusive space, and break the glass ceiling around STEM. ■