

BOF Proposal: Having Humanitarian Impact as a Technical Woman

Organizer: S. Revi Sterling (with local technical NGO representatives)

Overview of Session:

Technical students and professionals alike often come to a point where they question the long-range impact of their work. Until fairly recently, we had to separate our professional and personal interests in technology, but as companies, governments and universities struggle to address the digital divide – both internationally and locally – there are new opportunities to unleash your inner “technical humanitarian.” This session will discuss ways to address social issues through technical solutions, providing lessons learned and tips for learning *how* to have the right kind of impact.

Details of Session:

If you are not familiar with the work of Dr. Anita Borg, we encourage you to do a little research on her – not just her laudable work in operating systems research, but her creation of the Institute for Women and Technology (known as the Anita Borg Institute for Women and Technology following her death in 2003). Anita started the Grace Hopper Celebration of Women in Computing Conference, which is the grandmother event to this one and other similar regional events. Anita’s core vision has been described as following -- to increase *the impact of women on all aspects of technology*, and increase *the positive impact of technology on the world’s women*.

Certainly, the first part of her vision is being lived out here in Boulder, at this celebration. We are all here to support and learn from each other, and to build networks that will enable us to reach the professional heights we dream about, while making sure we bring along more junior women as we become leaders in our fields. It is the second part of Anita’s vision that is less obvious to tackle from our positions as technical students and professionals; it is this call to action, however, that can create opportunities to make lasting, positive impact while feeding our souls as technologists and women, fueling how well we accomplish the first part.

This panel will discuss how to engage with communities of need, how to create technical solutions to human problems, as well as point out pitfalls that technologists and technology companies fall into when trying to “do well by doing good.” We will highlight some of the successes of women technologists who are helping to empower others through technologies, as well as provide a “how-to” for those who are looking to increase the impact of their studies, work and research. We aim to facilitate a lively discussion about involvement, outreach, appropriate technologies, design considerations and anything else session attendees find relevant to the session.

We would love to talk about some of the assumptions, myths, and truths that underlie this conversation -- do women have a responsibility to help other women? Are we, as women, better suited to take on this intersection of society and technology? Is it true that women leave computer science and related fields because they do not see societal relevance in their work? Will a humanitarian angle attract and retain more technically-inclined women? What about men (both as contributors and beneficiaries)? At the end of the session, we hope to have planted seeds that attendees will further reflect upon, as well as provide practical avenues for their involvement, such as reading lists, names of projects and people to study, and organizations with proven track records of positive technical humanitarian programs.