

Collectives and Identity

The free and open-source movements are a massive experiment in decentralizing the creation of software among a diverse collective of unique perspectives. This offers a potential glimpse for communities to form radical new ideas that upend the status quo.

“ There is a conversation in the room that only this people at this moment can have. Find it.

— [Taj James](#)

On paper, this may appear as the utopian [egalitarian](#) ideal capable of giving both equal voice and access throughout the development process. We bring our entire selves to these creation-oriented ecosystems and that can bring as much synergy as friction.

Indeed, many people get involved with free and open-source software seeking to contribute back to the community. However, prejudice – already an existential problem within computing – have only further distilled within these communities.

We must actively work towards equitable and accessible systems that value our perspectives yet hold us accountable to biases. This may require radical new ideas and implementations, but we can still learn the value of our voice within the crowd.

Who Contributes?

There are limitless reasons why people contribute to free and open communities, spreading the gamut from altruistic to narcissistic – and just looking to get a paycheck. The people who become integrated into these spaces are just as varied as the software projects themselves.

“ Organizations which design systems (in the broad sense used here) are constrained to produce designs which are copies of the communication structures of these organizations.

— [Melvin Conway](#), "[Conway's Law](#)"

The ways in which a free and open-source project is organized can greatly impact their software. The inverse may also hold true - the software itself can play a role in the community that forms around it. These tensions are a dynamic process and every project responds to them differently.

[Debian](#) - the most popular community-supported Linux distributions - maintains a [social contract](#) that defines the expectations for affiliated volunteer developers. Each applicant must [undergo a vetting process](#) to better understand their technical skills, as well as their motivation and identity. With [each influx of interest](#), the process has [become more stringent](#). There are many reasons behind their contributions.

Diversity_3

Community Involvement

Many volunteers are looking to give back to the community and find fulfillment through simply being involved with others. They may use the software everyday and want to support it.

This can take many forms: participating in hackathons; undertaking code reviews; updating documentation; or simply sharing the word.

School

Continuing Education

Some volunteers are seeking to learn a new skill or further develop one they already have. Established open-source projects often excel at onboarding new community members, providing valuable structure and mentorship.

Paid

Paid Work

Not all people who [contribute to open-source projects are by necessity unpaid volunteers](#). The largest contributions to projects like the Linux kernel are by paid employees working for the companies like IBM and Intel.

Similarly, corporate Linux distributions like Red Hat provide paid hours to developing the Kernel for their own software. It is [not uncommon for contracted work](#) to be incorporated into open source software.

Interests

Side Projects

Some developers create their own software to solve a problem and end up sharing their solution freely, while others may seek fulfillment by creating something people like to use.

Solving puzzles with a community or fixing an irritating bug can scratch an itch. At the end of the day, it's about personal enrichment.

Cognition

Personal Motivations

Developers may be motivated by personal reasons stemming from emotional, political, social, interpersonal, economic or professional reasons.

Contributing to open-source projects can fulfill political agendas, [build up a developer's portfolio](#), or create a reputation within the community.

People are multifaceted and each volunteer may approach the project with overlapping motivations. [Volunteers are free to resign](#) at any time, for any reason – even without prior warning – through a simple public statement.

Diverse Perspectives

The free and open-source movements have grown steadily since the 1990s by offering solutions to everyday problems. A diverse community has emerged within people using the software, but the developers have remained rather homogenous: [primarily young White men](#). This has become more concentrated within open-source communities.

Toxic behaviors have left underrepresented communities feeling unwanted and they are forced to leave instead of engage. While there is [more visibility](#) on the [critical lack of diversity](#), more needs to be done to [create inclusive spaces](#). We can all do our part creating an accepting community.

Gender

Even though [programming was originally a feminized profession](#), there is a critical disparity when it comes to their representation within [computing in general](#). This has only grown worse within the free and open-source projects.

While researchers and journalists have employed differing methods for understanding this problem, they all reflect the same problem. Within the field of computing, approximately [22% of engineers identify as women](#). [Women do not feel that they have equal opportunities](#) for entering the field.

For open-source communities, this drops to estimates ranging from [1%](#) to [3%](#) when creating code. When [taking into account non-software contributions](#), this may be [upwards of 10%](#). The [most recent 2021 report](#) by the Linux Foundation suggests this has risen to 14% - still an incredibly small portion.

Despite the recent increase of women in open-source, [only 5% of projects have women](#) as core developers. This is compared to [over 30% of managers in computing](#) being women. When code is [pulled](#) from an external developer's project, [less than 5% of those developers](#) are women.

Queer Identities

There is a diverse spectrum of identities that we embody as we express ourselves. The diversity disparity in computing extends to people who identify as [queer](#) – or do not conform to societal expectations surrounding gender or sexuality.

An [estimated 3% of the technology sector](#) identify as queer within the tech sector, but this may not be a complete view. Identity can be personal and [nearly half of employees do not feel](#) comfortable being out with their identities at work. Overall, [queer identities are underrepresented in technology](#).

Within the [GitHub development community](#), there is more historical data available about how people's identities intersect with their contributions. Here, queer people have begun to find representation with 1% each identifying as transgender or non-binary as well as 7% considering themselves as queer.

The [most recent report](#) from the Linux Foundation suggests that this has been trending upwards. Through their survey, 74% of open-source contributors identify as heterosexual, 16% as queer and 10% choosing not to disclose.

Race and Ethnicity

Similar to computing, there is a dire lack of racial diversity in the open-source communities. Black and Latine people are [greatly underrepresented within software development](#). When it comes to management positions, the [majority are filled by White men](#).

There is surprisingly little hard data available to better understand diversity. [16% of developers identify as a ethnic or national minority](#), compared to the [national total of 34%](#). Latine, Black and Indigenous developers [do not feel that they have equal opportunities to participate](#).

Diversity_2

Age

Developers within technology – and open-source software – are predominantly young. Nearly half of professional developers are [between the ages of 25 — 34 years old](#). After the age of 40, [job hunting within the field can be daunting](#).

Within large tech companies, the [median age for workers](#) is about 30 years old. When it comes to learning how to code, [young adults from 18 — 24 years old](#) make up nearly half of learners.

Diversity_2

Disability

With the ability to work remotely on a software project, open-source software has [helped some people contribute more regularly](#). Within open-source, [surveys show 17% of contributors](#) have a long-term physical, mental, intellectual, or sensory impairment.

Barriers to Entry

Free and open-source software is used by the entire world in every field imaginable – from [agriculture](#) to [sports](#). [Open-source has become the default](#) in many industries, but it is clear that the voices who [contribute are not representative](#) of the diverse audience using the software.

The Linux Foundation has [addressed the importance](#) of diverse and inclusive open-source communities. Debian has [made efforts to address the problem](#) including a [paid mentorship program](#) – but [diversity may have actually decreased](#). Supporting a diverse community takes a multi-pronged: opportunities and healthy inclusive spaces.

Within the open-source community, there is a [silent illusion that has grown pervasive](#). Since inception, it has presented itself as a [meritocracy](#) – where good code receives merit and you gain access to more paid opportunities. While hiring software developers, employers often [consider open-source contributions](#) as an [important part of their portfolio](#).

The reality is that many people do not have time, money or energy to perform free labor for open-source projects within the current economy. Those that can participate may unknowingly create a project hierarchy based on who can *most frequently* contribute – not who has the most to contribute.

Perceived – [or enshrined](#) – authority that can be leveraged though toxic behaviors. [Linus Torvalds](#) has a [notably abrasive and demeaning](#) style. [Eric S. Raymond](#) has made many [inflammatory](#), [outrageous](#) and [hurtful comments](#) about people.

An unrewarding environment creates a digital fiefdom with uneven power and expectations – one project maintainer mandating it's direction. People who would otherwise have something to contribute choose not to participate with the project at all.

A meritocracy starts from the assumption that we all have the same opportunities and resources available to us. While a contributor's identity is not always obvious, this could explain why open-source projects are often so homogenous and lacking in diversity. Certain identities have an innate [social privilege](#) that can be wielded – either for or against others.

At times, the Internet can be an almost inhospitable place for women, people of color and queer identities. Women are [twice as likely to experience sexual harassment](#) online, while Black, Latine and Asian Americans have [experienced targeted hate attacks](#). Despite historic contributions by figures like [Alan Turing](#) and [Lynn Conway](#), queer people have faced discrimination and persecution in technology.

“ How would anyone expect folks who are in general harassed on the internet to suddenly trust an open source community to not behave the same way toward them, despite what its Code of Conduct document says?

— [Nisha Kumar](#), Technical Lead

When grouping developers by their individual contributions, the [percentage of women steadily declines](#) as the number increases. This is because they are [harassed at twice the rate of men](#), hindering their ability to [become part of the community](#). For underrepresented communities, [role models can be few and fleeting](#) within technology.

When [held to a higher standard](#) than men, women can be left [feeling alienated](#) and have [no choice other than leave](#). There is a [general assumption that contributors are male](#) and many women [feel they must create fake accounts](#) to be taken seriously.

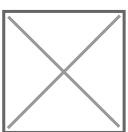
We have been faced with a global pandemic, civil unrest and the rise of [technofascism](#). People have become more emboldened to react negatively than to try and find common ground. Concerns about the open-source communities reputation for aggressive and unwelcoming behavior is well-founded.

I offer, from this defensive and sacred place, a protocol for those who are most comfortable approaching movements from a place of critique, AKA, haters.

1. Ask if this (movement, formation, message) is meant for you, if this serves you.
2. If yes, get involved! Get into an experiment or two, feel how messy it is to unlearn supremacy and repurpose your life for liberation. Critique as a participant who is shaping the work. Be willing to do whatever task is required of you, whatever you are capable of, feed people, spread the word, write pieces, make art, listen, take action, etc. Be able to say: “I invest my energy in what I want to see grow. I belong to efforts I deeply believe in and help shape those.”
3. If no, divest your energy and attention. Pointing out the flaws of something still requires pointing at it, drawing attention to it, and ultimately growing it. Over the years I have found that when a group isn't serving the people, it doesn't actually last that long, and it rarely needs a big takedown—things just sunset, disappear, fade away, absorb into formations that are more effective. If it helps you feel better, look in the mirror and declare: “There are so many formations I am not a part of—my non-participation is all I need to say. When I do offer critique, it is from a space of relationship, partnership, and advancing a solution.”
4. And finally, if you don't want to invest growth energy in anything, just be quiet. If you are not going to help birth or raise the child, then shhhhh. You aren't required to have or even work towards the solution, but if you know a change is needed and your first instinct when you see people trying to figure out how to change and transform is to poop on them, perhaps it is time you just hush your mouth.

— [adrienne maree brown](#)

Open-source contributors have expressed that, on the worst days, they "[feel drained, unappreciated, and even abused](#)". Almost a quarter of [contributors have made the decision to leave a project](#) in response to negative behaviors within the community.



While negative behavior might not be common, they are [extremely visible to everyone else](#) when they occur. Moderation within a public project can often be a [difficult and thankless task](#). Every other contributor has [witnessed toxic behavior](#) within an open-source project's community.

When subjected to this treatment in their daily lives, there is no fulfillment to be found through integration into abrasive communities. Social biases undermine diversity by making underrepresented identities feel as if their contributions do not speak for themselves - [that they are imposters](#) within a predominantly young heterosexual white male dominated space.

“ I don't think I get the same level of respect for my experience that a man would get with the same number of years of experience.”

— [Nellie](#), a programmer

This is not surprising when we consider that open-source has long [catered to abrasive personalities](#) . [Exclusionary and discriminatory language](#) are a growing problem within technology that leaves people feeling excluded and unwelcome.

It can require a [great deal of confidence](#) to contribute to an community-created project - especially when your reception may be negative. When new and curious contributors are seeking a mentor, they may instead find they are [treated as a burden](#).

“ Any time that I spend contributing to [open source communities] is time I could also be spending volunteering to advance LGBTQ equality, fighting against police brutality, and other issues that I care about, and that disproportionately affect underrepresented people—in fact, it's what makes us underrepresented in the first place.

— Perry Eising, [Community Manager](#)

Even though many developers have the ability to contribute on the clock, there are discernable discrepancies in the pay rates for [women](#), [people of color](#) and [queer people](#) within technology. Women are more likely to be their [family's primary earner](#) on top of having [domestic and family responsibilities](#).

The Value of Your Voice

There has been an increasing focus on facilitating communities that are inclusive and accessible to diverse people. While many of the words may seem like synonyms, they are all distinct concepts.

Through a variety of acronyms, we seek to touch upon the same concepts:

- [Inclusion](#)
- [Diversity](#)
- [Ethics](#)
- [Equity](#)
- [Accessibility](#)
- [Sovereignty](#)

Authoritarianism works to undermine these tenets by silencing our individual contribution and this has been an active onslaught. It is uncertain if recent social consciousness has led to lasting progress. Change is an [emergent process](#) and we can all use our voice to exert continued pressure.

“ A distinguishing feature of open source software versus proprietary software is that open source software tends to be used by a diverse community of users with different priorities, needs, use cases. I personally feel the more diverse and inclusive that community is, the better the end product is.

— [Greg Myers](#), support engineer

The [official definition of open-source](#) mandates that software cannot discriminate against any person or group. This means that software must be accessible to everyone - including people with disabilities. The standards behind open-source shares a great deal with the process of accessibility.

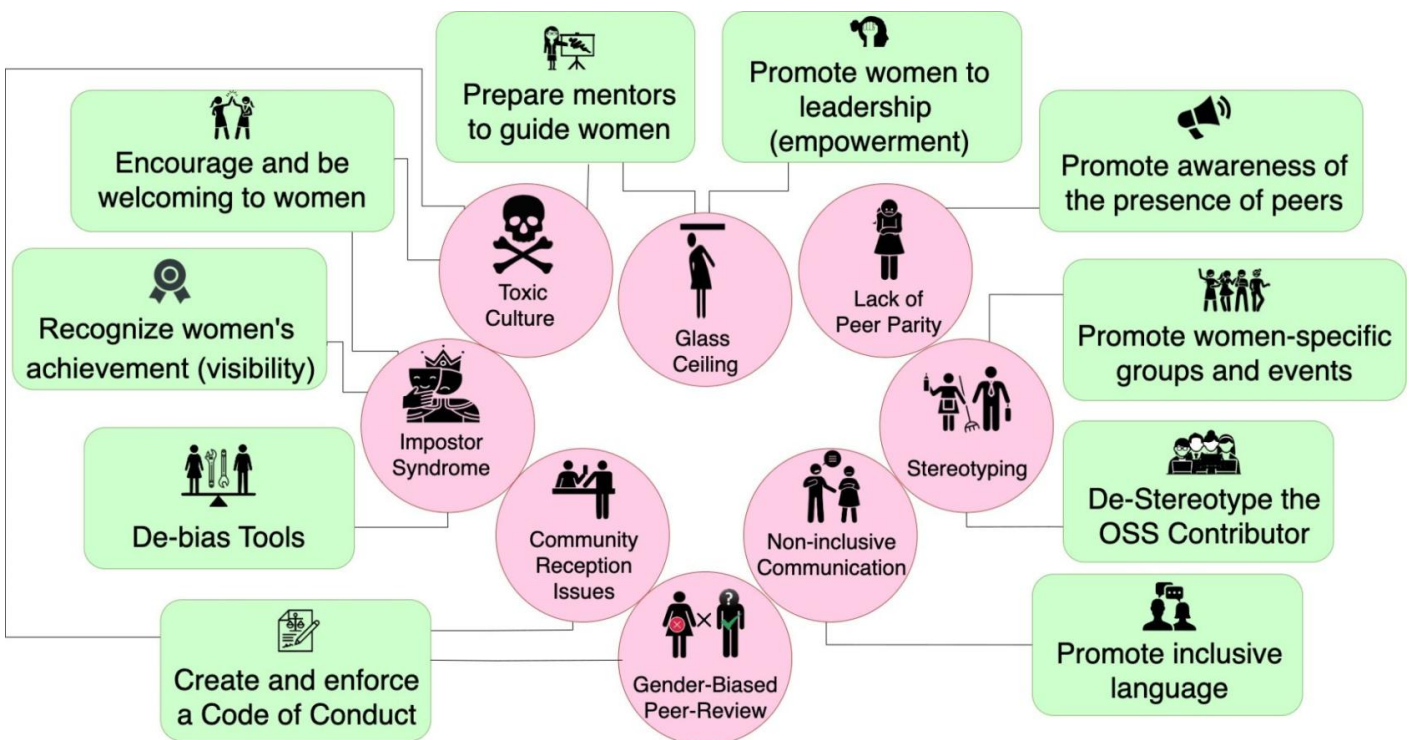
“ Accessibility aims to do the same thing, right? We want to make sure that as we're building software, we're building it with a diverse set of folks that are going to use it, and might want or need to use the technology in different ways.

— [Brendan O'Leary](#), senior developer

Creating true accessibility requires breaking down systemic barriers that keep underrepresented people from engaging in a fulfilling and healthy way. We need to proactively work towards inclusion in our communication within our communities.

There are perhaps a few signs indicating change for the better – both symbolic and practical. Linus Torvalds has [devoted time to learn more about empathy](#) in response to the rising intolerance within the open-source communities.

Many [projects are divesting from outdated language](#) and the influential [Linux Foundation](#) has even become proactive. For what it is worth, the [history of focused diversity outreach](#) predates the more recent trends within corporate culture.



<https://biancatrink.github.io/>

Here are some ways that you can directly engage yourself within an open-source community. There are so many community-driven projects and you can contribute even without knowing how to code:

Event

Plan

Creating an inclusive space is a commitment that is never truly finished and we must continue to make conscious decisions that can lead us to a more equitable future.

- Can you create opportunities to include diverse perspectives in the project?
- Can you champion role models that center underrepresented people?
- Can you form a call to action from within the project to create tangible supports for the many dimensions of diversity within a community?
- Can you focus on building equitable learning opportunities that enable people to integrate into the community?
- Can you organize accessible events that help introduce mentors to potential new contributors?

Forum

Communicate

Open-source projects are often decentralized, meaning that much of the development happens online through both real-time conversation and asynchronous messaging. If you are good with people, there are so many ways you can help out the open-source community.

- Push back against the [myth that open-source is a meritocracy](#).
 - Integrate into the conversation through forums, mailing lists and chat apps.
 - Enforce the code of conduct by pressing back on toxic behaviors and getting the maintainers involved.
 - Even if you cannot code, creating a positive environment for contributors can be as simple as a thank you.
 - Help get people new to the community up to speed by helping navigate the available documentation.
 - Attend events and get involved in talks about the project's future.
 - Be a nexus connecting people within the community based on their skills.
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Revision #25

Created 14 June 2025 09:16:20 by metaphorraccoon

Updated 24 June 2025 04:01:03 by metaphorraccoon