Women in Computing in the Czech Republic

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INTRODUCTION

While the countries of Western Europe and the USA are mostly in control of the design and construction of computing technology, the numbers of women actively involved in this process are very low and decreasing. The Czech Republic is an Eastern European country with highly developed system of tertiary computing education and levels of computer usage comparable to Western Europe. Whereas under capitalist regimes of the period equal opportunities legislation has often been achieved despite Government resistance, Communism built it into its constitution, and professed equality of men and women in every field of human activity. Publicly and in the national subconscious that equality became a reality. However, at a time when Western European governments and European Union (EU) legislators are finally awakening to the unequal position of women in technology, it is a perception that invites closer inspection. This article is based on a set of interviews carried out in the Czech Republic in August 2004 and a collection of official reports and quantitative data published in the Czech Republic between 2002 and 2004. The aim was to find out what has the new Czech regime done about gender equality in the field of computing and what importance the Czech officialdom assigns to the perception of equality. For comparisons this article assumes that the reader is acquainted with gender and computing debates in the "West."

BACKGROUND

Gender Equality Before and After the Velvet Revolution

The Czech Republic (then part of Czechoslovakia) became a "capitalist country" in the change of regime that occurred during the Velvet Revolution of November 1989 and subsequently became a member country of the European Union (EU) in May 2004. In preparation for its entry to the EU and as a reaction to direct criticism by the United Nations, the Czech political leadership was forced to follow gender equality movements, gender mainstreaming, and EU legislation and include gender equality on the country's political agenda.

During the years 1948-1989, the communist regime guaranteed the right to work for every citizen, stated quotas for women's employment and guaranteed women's rights in the constitution. The general population had no opportunity, nor the necessity, to discuss the meaning of gender or women's equal rights. Taking this "guaranteed equality" for granted, the population slipped deeper into accepting biologically and socially deterministic gendered views of the roles of men and women in society. While this supposed equality applied also in further and higher education, views of women not being suitable to study technology, and engineering prevailed and very few women applied. Most women worked in administration, school education, services and caring professions, men worked in fields of engineering, technology and were represented in large numbers in specialist medicine, politics, university education, and research.

When the communist regime was overthrown, gender initiatives developed mainly from the former dissident movement, the Czech Sociological Institute and interested individual academics. Based mainly on The Czech Sociological Institute's findings, the Czech Helsinki Committee reported in 1996 about the human rights situation in the Czech Republic. This very lengthy report contains a section on "Some aspects of women's rights in the Czech Republic" which mentions sexual harassment and unequal treatment in places of employment, advertising, pay, and the existence of glass ceilings. All this was described as almost a "Czech cultural norm" (a term coined by Hana Havelkova).

In 1990, the sociologist Dr. Jirina Siklova founded The Gender Studies Centre, a women's NGO. It is

an educational, information and advice centre for equal opportunities. It has its own library and Web site, a number of publications, and participates in national and international research projects. During a brief examination, I found that the library contains little about women in science and technology and nothing on women in computing.

By 1996, the Czech government was forced to begin the debate on equal rights for men and women in Czech society and in April 1998 it agreed its "Action Plan of Priorities and Activities for Enforcement of Equality of Men and Women." The government decreed that each of its departments had to cooperate with women's organisations.

Women in Computing in the Development of Government Gender Policies

The Ministry of Work and Social Affairs has been charged with collecting and publishing gender information and advising the Government. It has established a Department for Equal Opportunities for Women and Men, which publishes (since 1998) an annual "Aggregate Report on Fulfilment of Priorities and Activities of the Government for Enforcement of Equality of Men and Women." In October 2001, the Government established its advisory body The Council for Equal Opportunities of Men and Women with members representing ministries and NGOs (MPSV, 2004). The one ministry, which is *not* represented, is the Ministry of Informatics. The Aggregate Reports are only presented to the government after individual ministerial reports have been debated and accepted by this council.

The Ministry of Work and Social Affairs publishes a range of reports containing gendered statistics and reports on fulfilment of international agreements and recommendations (e.g., Beijing+5). There appears to be no specific interest in women in science and technology in all these publications. Most of them stress that equal rights and opportunities at work are guaranteed by national legislation. By such reports the ministry is trying to demonstrate to the EU that gender inequality at work does not exist. This appears to be in strict contrast with situations reported by the Gender Centre or the Czech Sociological Institute (Study on Paternity Leave, 2003). Using European Union grants, the

government has published material intended to educate employees about gender equality. This material has been distributed to government departments and local councils. There seems to be no evaluation of their direct influence on official decision-making and it was not in evidence during my interview at the Ministry of Informatics.

In my search for evidence of understanding of questions of gender and computing, I sent a questionnaire to the Minister for Informatics. His response can be summarised as follows: women in the Czech Republic do have equal opportunities in the workplace and in access to higher education. If they are under-represented in the IT industry, then it is because they do not choose to enter that field. Admittedly a stronger emphasis needs to be put on IT education, but this is the responsibility of the Ministry of Education, and the wider area of equal opportunities is the responsibility of the Ministry of Work and Social Affairs. The role of the Ministry of Informatics seems to be restricted to offering money for training courses in ICT literacy (National Programme).

The Commission for Informatics and Telecommunication—an advisory body on questions of policy in Informatics to the ruling Czech Social Democratic Party—comprises 30 members, of whom just one is a woman. An interview with two male founding members of the Commission confirmed that questions of gender and equal opportunities never reach the agenda. Neither saw any point in trying to persuade women to work in an industry where they "do not want to be." One of them believed that glass ceilings do not exist in the Czech Republic and that women do not wish to be competitive and "collect trophies," and therefore have no need to enter higher management positions. He also "knew" that women do not have the ability to manage technical university education, particularly mathematics, as they possess "different logical skills."

It is not difficult to infer the nature of the political advice that is informed by this kind of gender stereotyping.

Women in Computing in Higher Education

In general, Czech universities are divided into technical and humanities universities. Both types offer

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