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...