

# Women at disadvantage in education

Research shows sexism is taught early on and is pervasive in Czech society

BY NATALIA O'HARA  
FOR THE POST

In recent weeks, the issue of gender bias in education has once again hit the headlines, after a Charles University study revealed that 81 percent of students witness or experience sexual harassment at university, and the Education Ministry announced guidelines to combat sexist language in schools.

Growing interest from Czech media signals the public's changing attitude to a subject formerly considered unimportant.

"Ten years ago, people did not believe [gender discrimination] mattered," said Dr. Irena Smetáčková, a psychology professor at Charles University and co-author of the recent report on sexual harassment. "Now, we don't need to convince [the public] that this is an issue that needs discussing."

### Continued failings

"There is equality in Czech education, but only formally," Smetáčková said. She points to students being encouraged to

choose "gender-appropriate" careers, the sexism of textbooks and teachers' language, and widespread sexual harassment as continued failings.

"The danger is that gender stereotypes become invisible and automatic," she said. "The important thing is not that teachers teach about gender, but that they understand how it effects their communication with students."

Smetáčková points out wryly that the division of male and female students between subjects at university looks like segregation. At the Faculty of Education, two-thirds of students are female, and, at the Faculty of Mathematics, 90 percent are male. Subjects seen as masculine consistently hold higher prestige than "female" subjects.

Many European governments, including those of the United Kingdom and Germany, run programs encouraging female high-schoolers to take an interest in traditionally masculine subjects like physics or engineering. But the Czech Republic has done little to redress its imbalance or



Research shows sexual harassment is more pervasive than previously thought. WALTER NOVAK/The Pr

**Vysoká škola finanční a správní (University of Finance and Administration)**, established in 1999, is the first private university of economics, locally accredited by the Ministry of Education in the Czech Republic. Undergraduate and graduate degree programs in business administration by **City University of Seattle (CityU)** are also offered. CityU is accredited by the Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities, a regional accrediting body approved by the U.S. Department of Education. Regional accreditation serves as the most important means of assuring the quality of higher education through rigorous peer-review and evaluation. CityU has maintained continuous accreditation with the Commission since 1978, earning reaffirmation of accreditation in its last review in 2008. CityU will undergo its next regular ten-year full-scale accreditation review with a team of peer evaluators visiting its main campus in Bellevue, Washington on April 28-30, 2010. Members of that accreditation review team will also visit several other locations in the eleven countries where CityU offers instruction, including cities in Europe, Mexico, and Canada.

As part of this comprehensive accreditation review, CityU invite students, alumni, representatives of organizations which employ graduates, community leaders, and members of the general public comment directly to the Commission regarding their experience with the university. All comments should be mailed to the Commission no later than March 27, 2010 at the following address:

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to tap the scientific potential of 50 percent of the population. A study by the Institute of Sociology completed in 2005 found the majority of science teachers in Czech high schools mistakenly believed males were naturally more gifted in science than females, and accordingly gave them more attention and classroom time.

The factors that lead to boys choosing one set of subjects and girls another may be small, but the financial consequences are probably not. Czech men earn on average about 24,000 Kč a month, women 18,000 Kč, and more than half of the unemployed are female, according to the most recent data from the Czech Statistical Office.

**Textbook sexism**

Czech textbooks are another problem, characterized by assumptions that disappeared from most West European countries' textbooks by the late 1960s. Some math books still use the "correction" motif, in which a girl gives a series of wrong answers and is corrected by a boy, and books for younger children often represent a family regime in which the mother does housework, cooks and looks after the children while the father watches television. "It is a shame that very young children are being given these gender ideals," said Smetáčková, who points out that *Slabikář*, a book that teaches Czech children the alphabet, depicts "Mama" making breakfast and sewing under "M", while, under "T", "Táta" (Daddy) appears dressed as a doctor.

Sexual harassment is a less subtle recurring problem in Czech schools and universities. "It is not being tackled at all," said Kateřina Šaldová, a sociologist from the Institute of Sociology of the Academy of Sciences. "Nobody speaks about it, no anti-harassment policies are at the disposal of students or teachers at universities, and [there are] no codes of practice. It is a problem without a name."

According to the Charles University survey, 3 percent of students said they had been sexually harassed, which, if the study is representative of the student population, would mean 11,000 students had been sexually harassed. However, the real figure is likely to be higher, as students were often ignorant of what constituted harassment. Quid pro quo sexual harassment, whereby a staff member used grades as a bartering tool to gain sexual favors, was



**Irena Smetáčková, a psychology professor** at Charles University, says sexism plays a part in career choice

generally recognized as sexual harassment, but students were often unaware that unwanted touching, explicit comments or sexually degrading jokes also constitute harassment.

**Looking the other way**

Tolerance to sexual misdemeanors is not limited to universities. If a high-school teacher sleeps with a student who is 15 (the age of consent), there is a high chance no disciplinary action will be taken.

"The level of tolerance toward actions that could be considered sexual harassment is relatively high," said Tereza Kadlecová, an attorney with Weinhold Legal, one of the few Prague firms specializing in, among other fields, sexual harassment law. "People are not fully aware of what can still be considered a sign of harmless affection and ... [what is] sexual harassment."

Even more importantly, contrary to the norm in most other European countries, Czech educational institutions rarely have any rules in their protocol against sexual harassment, so victims of sexual harassment do not know whether they have the right to complain. Even when complaints are lodged, disciplinary decisions are often made by kangaroo courts run by the accused professor's colleagues.

"There was a famous case last year where a professor was offering his students the chance to re-sit failed exams only if they did him a favor ... such

as playing ping-pong with him topless," Smetáčková recalled. "The head of the faculty treated it as a joke. It was only after the media reported on the story that [disciplinary] action was taken."

"As in Czech society [on

the whole], sexual harassment is not seriously tackled," said Linda Sokačová, director of the Gender Studies institute and editor of *Gender and Democracy: 1989-2009*. "Universities are just waiting to see what the reaction of

students and the public will be."

— Klára Jiřičná cont. to this

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