

## **GIRL GEEK DINNER**

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**A geek girl dinner has been held for the first time in London, 2005, so far it has expanded around the world, and we have taken part in the Milan edition**

Everyone has probably felt as a minority, at least once, in an occasion where he or she should have theoretically been surrounded by kindred spirits. Sarah Blow went to a geek dinner where the men were treating the women, who weren't very numerous, as if they all worked in advertising – and nobody even noticed that she is a software engineer. So she decided not to waste any time, and organized a similar event – a girl geek dinner – wishing to give the participants an opportunity, at least on that occasion, to switch the roles of majority and minority. Therefore it is possible for the male geeks to participate in the geek girl dinners, but only if invited by a girl. And each one can invite only one of them. The motto is “definitely does compute”, which does mean that she uses computers but also sounds as “you can be sure that I think with my own head”.

The first dinner was held in London, in 2005, and in the meantime the initiative has spread throughout the whole world. We find it in various European countries, the United States, Canada, New Zealand etc. I have come across a voice, through Facebook, of a launch of a Macedonian version, and in Iceland they have decided to localize the name so “girl geek” has become "tæknitáta" [tæjhnitautá], which means the technological girl, and despite the biggest storm of the year they managed to organize their second dinner. I'd

like to emphasize that the term *dinner* often implies additional activities as well, such as presentations and skill exchange. Since 2007 there are also the Italian GGD, which I have discovered when they were organizing the fifth encounter, this time regarding Open Source. Since then, I have taken part in a GGD coffee meeting, and in another dinner where the collective GGD blog was announced. Apart from Milan, similar meetings are held, in Italy, in Rome and Urbino, and are being prepared in others cities as well.

The popularity of such a project is encouraging, considering the not very promising situation regarding gender equality in information technology. Despite the increase in use and understanding of technology by women, when it comes to career choices they opt for other areas. As a reason for that some still cite the stereotype of the classical “PC expert or hacker” - male, with limited interests, and not brilliant in communicating to people. Some would use the word nerd to describe such a person, or even the word geek. On the other hand, Sarah Blow has kept the second expression in the name of her project.

### **A passion for...**

Who are the geeks today, then? Depends. It is important to understand technology, and as Clo Willaerts from Belgium has noticed – what used to be negatively considered as obsessing, now is viewed positively as passion. It is not about what you do, but the approach you have, so the cuisine lovers, so-called “foodies”, are called “food geeks”, and there are subcategories for those who have a passion for crafts, films, music, books and everything else. Amanda Lorenzani, the

founder of the Italian GGD, says that the point is in continuously improving the quality of life, which she tries to express with the English word “enabler” - the one who keeps creating new options. Amanda Jackson, who lives in New Zealand, says that the word has become a compliment because it implies that the person is smart. The word nerd has some other connotations as well. In any case, both terms have had numerous and accelerated transformations, probably influenced, also, by the increase in importance of the skills these people have, in everyday life, industry and economy. And the computer itself, which used to be considered something in front of which people isolate themselves in their rooms – has become a window that opens that room to other worlds.

If it seems to you that communicating through a monitor and a keyboard might be boring, I can tell you that, ever since the first modems, many people might have met that way, but later they frequented each other in real life as well. Around the world, the non-conferences called Barcamp have become popular, and in Bologna a female version has been realized – the Femcamp. Talking with Susan Quercioli from the Milan GGD team, we have concluded this – it was possible, even before, to get to know someone, through a computer, who would share our interest for technology, but today there are more people online, so the choice is wider, and the common interest more diverse. Susan also notes the importance, for the improvement of women's professional situation, of the so-called networking, and not only by the use of computers. She considers that women, especially in Italy, are not inclined to maintain weak links to a bigger number of people who sooner or later may be useful to them in different ways, but react more emotionally,

thus reducing their horizons and the access to information and useful occasions. Girl Geek Dinners help change this.

### **Relationship with technology**

What kind of community is created through the intertwining of the digital and the physical worlds? Opinions and reactions range from alarm to enthusiasm. To remind myself of how none of this has started yesterday, I have gone back to the book “No Sense of Place: The Impact of Electronic Media on Social Behavior”, printed in 1985, written by Joshua Meyrowitz. He insists on this - it doesn't make sense to consider the social situations and the media transformations separately. In any case, the walls and the physical places have been determining human behaviour through the control of the access to information as well, and the electronic media have played a significant role in this regard – like the phone, the radio, the TV. All at once we had access to the internal information of other social groups (which has had an effect on gender roles as well), and there has been a change in the meaning that the so-called “stage” and “backstage” have in communication and the creation of self-image.

This is visible on the example of social networks, where the formal and informal behaviours are mixed in ever more complex ways. I can't, personally, come up with a definite answer on the question of how technology, media, economy, politics and society affect each other; and the question itself might remain open forever. But, considering the topic of this text, it is logical to ask oneself if women relate to all this – differently than men? As I was preparing this article, I have met many interesting people

and tried to sum up their opinions. Women are more often interested in what can be achieved with a tool, and man in the functioning of the tool itself. But on the differences between genders much has been thought and said, especially when it comes to the dynamics between the biological and the social aspects, and it's not easily simplified here.

Who understands Italian, can download a book, for free from [www.lulu.com](http://www.lulu.com), "Un altro genere di tecnologia" or "Another gender/kind of technology", written by various authors. Probably there is some truth to Meyrowitz's claims of the influence of electronic media on the greater diversity of social roles, accessible to all individuals, regardless of gender. But this hasn't resolved all the problems.

### **The glass ceiling**

Women are still paid less for the same jobs and less present in important management positions. There's also mention of the so-called glass ceiling, or the border where their careers often get blocked, inexplicably; and the question of the balance between their private lives and careers. Women can also be impeded by group dynamics, subtle sexism and the unclear mechanisms of advancement in the company hierarchy. Often it is the women, actually, under the pressure of their surroundings, who are too strict with themselves, giving too much importance to other people's opinions, and thus wasting energy, nerves and time. I have come to these conclusions, amongst other things, by consulting statistics and research results, like those published by Computerworld and The New York Times – about the decrease in the number of women in IT, but the numbers in question refer to the United States. European

Union has started, on this subject, the project IT Girls, "Great careers for great women". The initiative's web page contains interesting research and statistics, as well as advice about behaviours that can be employed by companies, in order to reduce these difficulties. I have also spoken to Marzia Vaccari, who has worked in IT, professionally, for years now, and has also been helping other women orient themselves in this world. With the organization Orlando, she has realized courses and project of professional improvement, through the server Women.it she takes part in the creation of Internet services, and there's also the interesting web search engine Cercatrice, useful for easier finding of information that escapes the generic tools. Marzia Vaccari notes that, often, the problem is in a weak interest of women themselves, but also that – after the initial resistance is overcome – they become interested in the chosen areas of study and are happy about their choice. A crucial role, in this regard, is that of role models and actual people women know, who already have a certain job. Marzia points out that new technologies and networks are an enormous opportunity, especially for women, but that it is important that their attitude is not consumerist but creative, and this is possible on all levels of expertise, even in the everyday use of the ever more popular commercial Internet platforms, if done with as much awareness and information as possible.

### **GGD girls**

GGD girls approach the Internet in different ways, using and adapting various digital tools, from servers and mailing lists, to social networks, and of course – the blogs are popular as well, and a few Wikis. The girls are very curious and open to the new

communication channels. In Italy they intend to use the collective blog to publish articles and information, which is useful for making the online socialization and cooperation even richer in contents. The 12<sup>th</sup> December dinner has served to present the project. There's also been an "idea lottery", to attract attention and break the ice in an interesting way: the participants wrote down their ideas for themes they'd like to read or write about on a piece of paper – which were later drawn, and prizes were given as well. Sponsors gave away gadgets and covered the costs of the dinner, and the girls volunteered to organize everything. The participation was assured by registering, and the available places (between 100 and 200) were filled in the first two days.

These events intend to achieve the best possible balance between informal socializing and concrete advantage, career and fun. The atmosphere is relaxed, but the goal is to contribute to gender equality in information technology and strengthen the role of women in society – be it by exchanging skills, seeking jobs, new gadgets, creating new acquaintances and collaborations... This project is developing in new directions, but basically it is simple and that's why it works and expands in the whole world. The message is clear: we are girls, and are not ashamed to show curiosity and intelligence – and we definitely want to learn something new every day about how things work and use this knowledge, as well, to adapt our everyday realities to our desires.

### **To learn more:**

<http://girlgeekdinners.com/>  
<http://www.girlgeekdinnersitalia.com/>  
<http://girlygeekdom.blogspot.com/>  
<http://www.barcamp.org/>  
<http://barcamp.org/FemCamp>  
<http://www.lulu.com/content/2219881>  
<http://skrati.net/nonsenseofplace/>  
["No Sense of Place" preko books.google servisa]  
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<http://www.nytimes.com/2008/11/16/business/16digi.html>  
[http://ec.europa.eu/information\\_society/activities/itgirls/info/index\\_en.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/information_society/activities/itgirls/info/index_en.htm)  
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