Essay

In this essay I will describe the feelings, ideas, and the criticisms which I had while attending the Grace Hopper Celebration 9197.

Traveling from Germany through Pittsburgh to San Francisco has been adventurous for me. It was even more exciting, as the Grace Hopper Celebration was the start of my nine month visit as a research scholar at Cornell University. On the way from San Francisco Airport to San Jose, I was absorbing american west coast life style. At the station in San Jose, I asked an office clerk: "Can you tell me the way to the Fairmont Hotel, please?" He: "Do you want to stay there? It is very expensive!" I: " I have a scholarship which is paying for it." He:"Oh, it's a very cool hotel." Truly, the Fairmont Hotel is a "very cool" hotel and I was overwhelmed by the first sight of it. Staying on the Fairmont Hotel made the Grace Hopper Celebration a very unique and extraordinary experience.

As Tracy Camp said, attending a conference with over 600 women, female computer scientist, is an indescribable feeling and indeed I find it very hard to describe adequately the pictures which come to my mind. I was confirmed in my ideas, I was able to pull out new energy and power, and I was inspired by the women I met and I talked to. Most rewarding for me was the exchange of ideas myself and other women in coming to understand the American university system. German female computer scientist often look jealously at the situation of women in computer science in the US as more women are studying and working in computer science there than in Germany. Hence, I was astonished to hear that the percentage of women in CS in the US is declining as well as in Germany. I found this fact a bit depressing and discouraging. The discussions why there are so few women in CS on the conference were well known to me, as I had many of these discussions in Germany and no one seems to have a solution to this problem. The approach which was presented by Carnegie Mellon University to study gender relations within the structure of computer science curriculum is in my opinion a good start to review, restructure and remodel computer science to a more gender equal science. Moreover, it was impressing to see and hear the founder of the Systers-mailing list and founder of the Grace Hopper Celebration Anita Borg and to see Pamela McCorduck whose books I have read. I found it especially interesting to see, meet and hear the pioneering women talking about their life as a female computer scientist and their retrospectives on their careers. As one of my interest is the his- / herstory of computer science I have read about pioneering women in computer science like Thelma Estrin, Judith Clapp, Ethel Marden, etc., and it was a very special experience to see herstory is alive.

In addition I was impressed by the enthusiasm women exuded. It was particularly striking when Anita Borg announced that she wants to found an institute which combines computer science with feminist research, an enterprise in which I would love to participate. I think because of this tremendous enthusiasm it is possible that there will be such an institute within the next year. However, I felt that one forgot about the reasons why we want to have such an institute and what the purpose of it is. I was missing the actual content of this enterprise. What kind of research do we want to pursue? What kind of projects do we want to work on? Is it already feminist CS, if we design "nice" 3-D gloves or "nice" 3-D toggles? Or is feminist research about something else? But I also realized, why such an enterprise would be very difficult to carry out in Germany. German women were more likely to discuss the purpose of such an institute, would ask exactly these questions, but as it is probably very hard to agree on these questions, we would never reach the point of actual realization.

The second issue I found particularly puzzling concerned how to pursue a career. Several workshops dealt with this subject. I definitely feel very strongly the importance of such workshops and of empowering women through them. However I was surprised at how uncritical and unreflected women were dealing with success and career. Do I really want to work 80 hours a week? Do I want to sacrifice my private life for a career? Moreover women do have different career paths than men, which are not as straight as the career paths of the competing men. But, why do carreers have to be like that? Why can we not think of a different carreer? Why do we not develop a different scenario? Why do we have to adapt? I guess I learned how to play by the rules in order to have success or at least I am aware that there are these rules. But often I do not want to follow them. I believe that these rules are in its essence patriarchal and just by following the rules of success we will not change the system which is behind these rules. Just by empowering women and pushing more women into power, we will not change the way computer science is done. In my opinion, only if we refuse to follow all of the rules, we are able to change them.

Last but not least, I am grateful for the scholarship and the opportunity to attend the Grace Hopper Celebration 97. It was a very impressive experience and I am looking forward to the next GHC.