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The Empowering Impact of Mother Centers on Women, Children and Society

The disempowerment of mothers and children

Motherhood in contemporary industrialised societies faces a fundamental structural double bind. While ideologically valued or sometimes over valued, the structures of society speak another language. As mothers women are marginalised and excluded from societies' channels of resource allocation, participation and decision making. The overall market orientation of highly industrialised societies exclude all those from mainstream society who are engaged in care work. Care is defined as "unproductive work". Those dealing with taking care of the needs of children, the frail, the elderly and of men, whose labor market involvement leaves them no time for this part of life, are severely disadvantaged in their competing power in the labor market. They fall out of mainstream society and its decision making channels, are marginalised and excluded from public life.

Due to a gender specific division of labor, it is mostly women who take on the majority of care work and the reproductive tasks and responsibilities in families and neighborhoods.

In industrialised societies of today the experience of motherhood is marginalised, the mother child relationship experienced under conditions of isolation. Children experience decreasing access to peer contacts and to public space, due to the increase of single child families and increasingly dangerous environments. Mothers often lack peer contacts.

Urban environments have developed social structures which avoid encounters between adults and children other than in highly specialised children's services or inside the walls of the family home or car. It is becoming increasingly difficult for children to move on their own in public. Streets used to be one of the most important social places for children. Today this has been sacrificed to the priority of cars and traffic. From an early age on children learn that the omnipotent vehicle is more important than their natural and spontaneous desire to move. They learn on our streets that they are the weakest part of society. They depend on their parents or caregivers, who control their mobility and they stand little chance of exploring the environment on their own. Mothers and children often experience a culture of hostility towards children in public environments. A society not welcoming and not incorporating children into public life has negative effects on their confidence, vitality and development as well as on the confidence of their care givers.

Because care responsibilities are not considered as work in our society, the expertise resulting from practical experience in caring for children and other dependants is not acknowledged and is often neglected in public decision making and in public life, which relies heavily on experts with formal qualification and professional positions.

Women spend more time in the homes and in the communities than men. They use them not only as recreational space, it is their work place and work environment. Thus they often have a lot of practical knowledge about how urban infrastructure and housing should look like to meet the requirements of the main users, women, children, youth, the frail, the elderly.

Empowered Mothering¹

Empowerment in the context of Mother Centers is both an individual and a collective process. It links to the transformative traditions of grassroots women's movements that look at gender roles as a social construction and a fundamental element in the practice of social change.

Mother Centers are about empowering mothers and creating empowered mothering.

The dominant discourse of motherhood promotes an ideal that is impossible to achieve and often leaves mothers feeling inadequate, deficient and guilty. Mother Centers give women space to look at motherhood from their own experience and define mothering in their own terms, many of which challenge dominant ideas and practices. In MC women are welcomed to think about and meet their own needs as well as the needs of their child. They are encouraged to involve others in their children's upbringing, they are supported in questioning expectations placed on mothers in society and challenging the idea that the only emotion mothers ever feel for their children is love. In Mother Centers mothers are treated with respect towards their own experience of mothering and supported in believing in and learning from their experience and if necessary challenging mainstream concepts on parenting. In Mother Centers the work of mothering is valued and acknowledged, and a woman's race, age, sexuality, family arrangement, or marital status does not determine her capacity to mother. In Mother Centers mothering is no longer confined to the private space behind domestic walls but is taken out into a community setting which makes social, cultural and political change possible. Peer support and a community of like-minded mothers are crucial, if not essential, for the success of empowered mothering.

Claiming Public Space

One of the crucial factors of the success of the Mother Center movement lies in the strategy of claiming public space for mothers and for mothering. Mother Centers create new spaces for women to collectivise around shared experiences of motherhood and social exclusion and critically analyse the structures that marginalise the voice and influence of mothers in society.

These spaces facilitate women to recognise their own agency and power for change, to confront and transform the social and cultural arrangements of motherhood. They create an opportunity to identify and articulate the changes they want to make as mothers and to evolve strategies to do so. They learn to use more social and public space both for themselves and for their children. They create new balances for reconciling family life and public activity and offer a place for women to envision and demand a world that is more accommodating towards children, women and families.

¹ Empowered Mothering is a current discourse in the evolving Motherhood Movement in the USA and Canada led by groups like Moms Rising, Mothers Acting Up, Mothers and More, Mothers Ought to have equal rights, the Association for Research on Motherhood and many others. The mothers' movement in the United States is currently aimed at gaining increased societal support for mothers and the work of nurturing children. The agendas of many mothers' groups are focused principally on issues of work and family. But a dazzling array of new issues raise fundamental questions that concern mothers and call for activist mothering like the commercialization of childhood, the treating of children as commodities and providing an end to the media-generated "mommy wars."

Mother Centers are places where women organise without being clientalised. Women experience themselves as experts on family and community life, supporting each other on a peer level in creating problem solving strategies for themselves and their environment. They challenge the exclusion of children from public life, which is one of the greatest factors contributing to the exclusion of women from public leadership and decision making.

In Mother Centers women develop personal and political agendas around shaping motherhood and child raising, they develop the collective strength to move these agendas forward. Mother Centers are part of a process of social transformation. A process that transforms individuals as well as communities, and has had its impact both on the lives of participating parents and children as well as on the shaping of concepts and practices of family and social welfare policies, governance and the delivery of social services.

Individual and collective empowerment

In an evaluation study conducted by the German Youth institute the following responses were received to the question what effects the Mother Centers have on the lives of the participants and the community:

- 80% of respondents feel that Mother Centers enrich the community
- 70% of participants state that they have learned more tolerance
- 67% affirm that their center has taken influence in the community by political actions
- 67% of fathers see Mother Centers as a positive influence on changing family roles
- 58% say they have learned to participate and raise their voices
- 55% answer that they have learned to cope with every day life with more calm and confidence
- 47% notice improvements in the conditions for families in their community
- 46% of the responding Mother Centers are represented in municipal councils and task forces

On the individual level dimensions gained by participating in Mother Centers include support to find employment or create income generating activities, more self confidence, vitality and improved gender equity. Increase in the domestic involvement and participation of fathers and support the reconciliation of work and family life. Skills and capacities gained include organising and negotiation skills, communication and relationship skills, improved stress resistance, capacity to work in teams, increased willingness to take responsibility as well as to develop tolerance and flexibility. They bring marginalised and excluded groups into social participation.

For children Mother Centers create the opportunity for children under kindergarten age to meet and interact.

On the social level Mother Centers bring marginalised and excluded groups into social participation, revitalize neighborhoods and local culture, generate innovations in professional and institutional program, create a rich environment for informal learning, develop leadership potential in the

community and are incubators for new ideas and local problem solving.²
The following are some quotes from MCs around the world.

“Having Mothers in the center of the community fits well with our tradition. We come from a matriarchal society, which means women take a leadership role, they drive the community. But it is men who are running our organisations, our government. I wanted to see women more in control. This whole male dominance. I grew up accepting it, but as I became more involved in working in the community, I started questioning it more. The process was an awakening. When I started this, I did not know I had the capacity. When I started, I worked for a boss, I worked for somebody who was my mentor. I thought he is brilliant. He does all this stuff. So I did not have the self belief that I could start an organisation and manage it. It was other people who saw it in me. How I organised meetings, how I could get everybody together, get the government to listen to me, I could bring people in that nobody else could. They convinced me I could do that, but I had a lot to learn. What community centers were all about, and why Aboriginal women were not going there. And as I was finding out what was going on in the community I found out how male dominated it was and how little support they give to women’s organizations” (Canada)

“Experience in the centers makes the women realise that they are good at many things, that they can earn with those things. For example the women here do not realise that they can make money from cleaning houses, making lunches, renting their rooms, because they have done that all their lives but only for their families. They now realise they can start doing that to earn money”. (Bosnia)

“It is a process of awakening of women, because they often live in certain stereotypes, carrying the burden of everyday duties. They become aware of things that they did not see as issues, but when they are more confident they see that there are things they do want to change. They are in roles artificially, being forced by grandmothers or husbands, and they do not want to get into conflict. The Mother Center gives them a chance to see what they really want, and to stand up for it. They discover themselves, they reflect on their wishes and visions”. (Slovakia)

“Mother Centers support women, so that they can grow, gain self confidence and make something out of their lives. Women develop greatly during their time in the center. They move on to get education, then to paid jobs. This is a place for development and growth in every possible way. It is a copy of the wider society. You can train yourself for all the issues out there in a safe environment. And in the center, in the small society” you see the effects of your actions: And afterwards you also feel confident enough to take bigger steps, to go out into the larger environment. (Netherlands)

“Mother Centers are a very unique approach to integrating migrant women, often the only public place they can access and the only public contact they have with the host society. We offer language courses, but we also offer creative activities, that all women can participate in, regardless of their language abilities. That creates a non intimidating and low threshold

² See DJI project Evaluation der Familienselbsthilfe, München 2000

atmosphere. Our language lessons are also more popular than elsewhere, because you can learn Dutch here, by applying it too. You can meet women in the same situation, you learn the language by speaking and doing things together.” (Netherlands)

“The center plays an important part in the neighborhood. For instance when the streets needed to be changed, the municipality wanted to ask the opinions of the people living on the street. Usually it is very difficult to get any response in low income neighborhoods. People don’t answer written questions, they don’t come to citizens hearings. The Mother Center women went out and knocked on the doors of all the houses on the street and invited the families to a meeting in the center. And they came. There were 100 people there and they indeed had opinions and something to say to the issue. Civil servants always complain that it is difficult to get participation of the population. They do not really know how to connect to the people who it really concerns. It needs a place like a Mother Center, where women are not intimidated and where they can convene and reflect on their ideas about their environment and the neighborhood.” (Netherlands)

“We see a worrisome trend in current pedagogical debates. Children are reduced to their achievement potential. They are seen as commodities, in which to invest. Programs are being discussed to test children 24 to 15 months before they enter school on the level of their school skills. On this basis 4-5 year old children are split up into different educational programs, introducing performance assessments and selection at this early age. We strongly criticise this narrowing down of the focus of child raising to school performance instead of taking the development of their whole personalities and happiness as point of departure.” (Germany)

“The tax and social security system is designed in a way that discriminates against families, creating heavy economic burdens for families with children. Couples with children have a loss of income over a time period of 20 years of half a million Euros in comparison to couples without children. Having children is currently one of the largest poverty risks in affluent societies. Approximately 5 million children in Germany are living in poverty. We are advocating on this issue. It is a scandal in such a rich country as ours.” (Germany)

“We are creating knowledge about raising children from sharing and reflecting our own experiences. This is important knowledge that we want other parents to know about, that we want kindergarten teachers to know about. In our campaign ‘How do we want to raise our children?’ we are developing a strategy to structure this knowledge and to transfer it. We are a fourth pillar in family education. There is school education, workplace training, training from family welfare institutions, and there is the university of parenthood that we provide in the Mother Centers.” (Slovakia)

Advocacy

Mother Centers support the re-entry of women into public life, not only via the routes of professionalisation and labor market participation, but also by creating direct channels to increase the participation of community and neighborhood women in local politics and community planning and development, with special focus on the needs and views of families and children.

The objective is to create visibility, validation and equity for the work women are taking on in the family and in the communities and for the competences and expertise developed thereby so that they can be included in the problem solving and decision making processes in the community. Major resources and expertise are wasted by not consulting with users at the grassroots level and by not considering their daily life experience as qualification.

A major motivation is to raise the priority with which decisions about resources and public expenditure and the provision of services are directed towards improving the living conditions for families and children.

Mother Centers empower women to initiate social change in their environment. Issues they have addressed in local, regional and national campaigns include improved safety in urban environments, green belts in the community, playgrounds, housing and development of residential areas, youth programs, environmental health issues, reforms in health care and in the conditions in hospitals, the povertisation of families, as well as reforms in childcare and the system of education.

A major accomplishment of the Mothers Centers has been the allocation of funds to support Mother Centers. This has often involved major innovation in legislation and funding regulations to allocate funds to the grassroots level and to remunerate and acknowledge the qualification of women's work outside of professional channels.

The development of the Mother Center movement raises issues of welfare policies and welfare legislation of a larger nature. Mother Centers are extremely successful on the ground. They reach families who are not reached by welfare institutions and social services, they bring out capacities and competencies that are otherwise lost to society. They answer to many issues that are currently high on the agenda of public debate, like strengthening the participation of civil society, especially of women, integration of different cultures, social cohesion in neighborhoods as well as improving the quality of family socialisation and child rearing and accessing undeveloped talent and potential. Their success, however, is not matched to the same extent by political and administrative recognition and financial support. This has been analysed as a "political governance paradox", arising out of the fact that current governmental top down welfare approaches do not fit the needs and parameters of bottom up self help initiatives, so that the very formula that creates the success of the Mother Centers generates resistance from the institutions and organisations, where the money, recognition and support should come from.³

A weakness of the present welfare system is the degree of specialisation and segmentation that has developed in delivering support and services. Increased professionalisation has resulted in the slicing up of life into social issues, target groups, specialised themes and funding titles.

³ Joyce Hes, "Dominator of Faciliteren" , Den Hague 2003

Much of the success of the Mother Centers is due to the fact that they follow more of a family than an institutional approach. Addressing the family as a whole, rather than children, youth, women, the elderly, in separate approaches, reflects and builds on the synergy of the family as a system. Especially in the context of migrant families an integrated approach is crucial in order to build on and enhance self coping energies and strategies, which are very much linked to family and kin networks.

A big issue that hinders the development of innovation and creativity in social welfare is the tendency towards centralisation and large welfare institutions with increasingly bureaucratic structures. The further away decisions are taken, the more likely it becomes that they are not in tune with what works on the ground. There are many examples of such miscommunication and misalignment between the work of the Mother Centers and the attitudes, procedures, requirements and regulations of welfare and governance institutions. Mother Center advocacy activities on local governance structures are creating important steps towards improving the effectiveness of family and social welfare policies. Through more direct communication channels between decision making, funding procedures and the implementation at grassroots level, funding can be more fine tuned to the real requirements on the ground, which more often than not also reduces costs.

Creating direct funding titles for family and community self help initiatives, increasing the margins of tax free remuneration for civic work and creating opportunities and incentives to supplement welfare subsidies with paid work in the community, constitute some of the advocacy lessons learned from the Mother Center movement that point to strategies of creating a new welfare mix, that can both counteract negative effects of unemployment as well as generate stronger civic involvement.

With this short synopsis of some of the empowering impacts of the Mother Center movement I have taken you through very different levels of empowerment, empowerment on individual as well as community level and impact both on the level of women, families, children and neighborhoods as well as on the level of gender, family and welfare policy, legislation, local governance and the concept of care in modern societies. Mother Centers relate to all these levels and we will have the opportunity throughout the next days to go into detail on many of the issues raised.