

Mother Centers Around the World

I. Background

Mother Centers represent one of the most amazing grassroots women's movements spear headed by women at the community level.

Originating in Germany they have spread over the past decade across the world. Mother Center initiatives are found in Albania, Argentina, Austria, Bosnia Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Cameroon, Canada, Czech Republic, Germany, Guatemala, Italy, Kenya, Liechtenstein, Macedonia, Nepal, Netherlands, Poland, Russia, Rwanda, Serbia, Switzerland, Slovakia, and USA, all in all representing a network of over 850 Mother Centers worldwide.

Mother Centers show an impressive potential to bring women and families out of isolation and crisis, to rebuild their confidence and ability to help themselves and support each other in improving their living conditions. Mother Centers initiate collective income generation projects and help single mothers to get off the welfare system. They empower grassroots women to raise the issues of families and communities and to participate in decision making processes at the local and national level.

Despite new levels of global connection, the human condition remains unchanged. At the grassroots level, a child needs sustained nurturance and stable relationships, and mothers need support in performing this daunting task which is often not anymore naturally available through family structures in contemporary society. Mother Centers are a vivid example of what it needs to implement the „It takes a Village Concept“ into neighborhood structures of industrialised societies as well as into the rapidly changing conditions of developing countries.

In a world where violence is increasing among youth and children, who fail to feel a meaningful connection to society and in societies where old age is decreasingly embedded in traditional care systems, new ways of fostering community are needed.

How do Mother Centers work?

Mother Centers are meeting points in the community for families. Activities include nursing groups, play groups, language and computer courses, courses on ecology in the household and on alternative health care, family support services like toy libraries, second hand stores, baby sitter service, family excursions and intergenerational festivities, as well as income generating activities like hairdressing, childcare, eldercare, hot lunches and laundry services. Space for the centers are negotiated with local government or with foundations, NGOs and other institutions like churches or the YWCA.

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Mother Centers have impact on many levels. They influence the quality of parenting and child raising as well as the quality of family relations. They revitalise neighborhood and community networks as well as bringing a grassroots partner to local governance. They empower families to take charge of their own lives as well as develop mutual support.

II. Mother Centers in different World Regions

Europe

In industrialised countries the experience of motherhood is increasingly marginalised, and the mother child relationship is often experienced under conditions of isolation. Children experience decreasing access to peer contacts and to public spaces due to the increase of single child families and increasingly dangerous environments. Young mothers often experience a process of loss of self-confidence, when living at home with children, which demands different rhythms and laws than those constituted by public norms.

Mother Centers offer peer contact and exchange on a drop in basis as well as household and personal support services. The centers are described as „public living rooms“. They allow women and children to claim public space. They revive neighborhood networks that have gotten lost by modernisation and industrialisation.

Mother Centers support the leadership potential of women in the communities and challenge the exclusion of children from public life, which is one of the factors contributing to the exclusion of women in public decision making.

Mother Centers are an answer to some of the most pressing issues in Central and Eastern Europe. In societies where the tradition of self help has been discontinued and the role of civil society systematically dismantled, communities need a place where they can reassemble and relearn to establish confidence and trust to build democracy from the bottom up. Many projects contributing to the reconstruction of post-socialist societies focus on rebuilding political, infrastructural and economic institutions, which often are severely lacking. The Mother Centers focus on an aspect that has proved to be an equally important need in the region: the rebuilding of family, the rebuilding of neighborhoods, the reweaving of the social fabric in countries of Central and Eastern Europe.

After the experience of „collectivising“ the raising of children, parents in post socialist countries take a keen interest to consciously take charge of parenting themselves and to influence the way their children grow up in today’s society. Mother Centers create possibilities for a wide range of peer learning, for parents to exchange views, experiences and information on parenting. They offer a platform for families to identify and voice their problems and to engage in active advocacy for family and community issues, so that these are not neglected in the process of new economics and new governance.

In post war countries on the Balkan, the disruption of old patterns and securities, the shame and despair of poverty and not knowing how to cope, causes many people to withdraw into their homes and not reach out. Depression and apathy are wide spread. Mother Centers create animated meeting points in the neighborhoods to rebuild identities and social ties. Where family and neighborhood networks have been torn apart by war they offer a structure to recreate community and social bonding. They provide a “home

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outside of home”, a place to relearn trust and social integration. They function as a switch board for information, skills, and support for every day life and survival issues. They create safe opportunities for children to meet and interact with other children.

In Albania, Bulgaria, Macedonia, Serbia and Slovakia Mother Centers are being created in Roma communities as a way to activate women in the communities as well as as a way to integrate Roma and non Roma families.

Canada

Canada has special needs related to a multicultural society and to the growing urban First Nation population which are particularly marginalised and face multiple challenges including family violence, alcohol and drug addiction as well as long term welfare dependency. There are few preventive programs with this high-risk group and those that do exist often deal with only one facet of the aboriginal community. There is an important immediate need for places where aboriginal mothers can gather without being stigmatized as clients of various social service agencies.

Mother Centres in Canada help build a safer environment and more sustainable future for socially excluded children and families .In organising as social enterprises they have a strong focus on income generation and job promotion.

In the understanding of the First Nation communities Mother Centers are recreating the tradition of Long Houses providing everything under one roof: taking care of the young and the old, health services, shared meals, and shared businesses. Social enterprises create a third way between welfare dependency and the labour market. In the process women gain confidence and can create sustainable futures for themselves and their families.

USA

The National Association of Mother Centers in USA addresses the needs of mothers through a program that recognises the importance of mothers to society, valuing both their paid and unpaid work. While the concept of motherhood is generally held in high esteem, the reality is that motherhood is often entered into in the US with little support, training or preparation. Many women enter motherhood with intense feelings of isolation and uncertainty. Mother Centers support women to become informed and active on her own behalf as well as on the behalf of her family. They gain knowledge, skills and understanding that translates into healthier families and communities.

The US Mother Centers are also active at the workplace. They offer working parents an opportunity to share parenting information, find resources and form relationships around the challenges of balancing work and parenting responsibilities.

Africa, Asia, Latin America

In developing countries limited job opportunities, rising living costs, poverty and the rapid spreading of aids have placed an increasing burden on women and the family unit. More and more women are becoming single heads of households. Traditional social security networks are eroding. Rural-urban migration, increasing violence, the eroding of community trust, and the breakdown of the traditional village and family social networks

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mean that there are fewer support systems in place to help women and their families to cope with the challenges of globalisation.

In informal settlements children are often left alone to play in the streets or are locked in the houses when women engage in informal employment. This can result in fire outbreaks and other accidents as young toddlers play with fire equipment alone in the house or attempt to cook for themselves. Many children have been burnt to death or are subject to health hazards when mothers take them along when selling merchandise along the main streets or gathering garbage to sell to recycling companies.

Mother Centers in developing countries provide a safe space for women and their children. Support is provided to families, especially those whose children are malnourished, sick or orphaned. Adult literacy, education in health and family planning, parenting support for teenage mothers, home based care of HIV Aids patients as well as income generating projects are some of the activities organised in the centers. Women receive vocational training as well as support in setting up their own businesses. Childcare is offered as well as feeding programs for young children.

III. Allocation and Contacts

The International Mother Center Network Mine

www.mine.cc

Founder and Senior Consultant: Monika Jaeckel, jaeckel@mine.cc

Chair: Andrea Laux, laux@mine.cc

The Mother Center International Network (**mine**) connects Mother Centers worldwide by conducting campaigns, exchanges and trainings for the Mother Centers around the globe. Experience shows, that the Mother Center idea spreads like a virus, but that implementing and adapting it to the local conditions often proves to be difficult, not only because of the lack of funds and resources, but also because of the lack of experience of local authorities in how to support self-help and grassroots activities. Mine offers start-up support and consultation both to local Mother Center initiatives as well as to local authorities or other stakeholders supporting the creation of Mother Centers.

Asymmetrical Distribution of Mother Centers

In countries where local government provides rent free space to grassroots groups, Mother Centers have spread widely as a self help movement. In poor and developing countries public space is often treated as a major economic asset. In such areas so far only single Mother Centers have manifested. The support of foundations and other stakeholders is called for here for Mother Centers to spread¹. The following gives a quantitative overview of the different scales in the spreading of Mother Centers in different countries:

¹ Spreading like wildfire, Results of the study: The Elements of Spontaneous Dissemination of Social Practice – the Experience of the Mother Centers, Den Haag 2007

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Germany

There are over 400 Mother Centers in Germany, that are organised in national and regional Mother Center networks:

www.muetterforum.de

info@muetterforum.de

www.muetterzentren-bv.de

Czech Republic

The Czech Republic has over 180 Mother Centers that are organised in the Association of Czech Mother Centers with headquarters in Prague.

www.materskacentra.cz

Rut Kolinska, info@materskacentra.cz

Slovakia

Slovakia has over 70 Mother Centers organised in the Union of Slovak Mother Centers with headquarters in Bratislava

www.materskecentra.sk

Elena Bakosova, elena@materskecentra.sk

Mother Center Networks in Western Europe

Mother Center networks also exist in Austria (over 50 centers), Italy (11 centers) , Netherlands (30 centers and 39 initiatives), and Switzerland (22 centers) .

Austria

www.eltern-kind-zentren-tirols.at

www.babyguide.at (Eltern-Kind-Zentren)

Italy

www.elki.org

Netherlands

www.moedercentrum.net

www.moedercentra.nl

Switzerland

www.muetterzentrum.ch

Roma Mother Centers

Roma Mother Centers have been initiated in cooperation with local Roma organisations in Albania (2 initiatives), Bulgaria (6 initiatives), Macedonia (1 initiative), Serbia (1 initiative), and Slovakia (3 initiatives).

Albania

valbonatp@yahoo.com

Bulgaria

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www.integro-bg.org

Macedonia

bairskasvetlina@yahoo.com

Serbia

zajednons@ptt.yu

Slovakia

marysapolu@azet.sk

USA

In the USA the Mother Centers have organised as National Association of Mother Centers (NAMC) representing 40 Mother Centers.

www.motherscenter.org

Countries of Single Mother Centers

Mother Centers have so far remained single initiatives in Argentina (1), Bosnia (2), Canada (1), Cameroon (1), Guatemala (1), Kenya (1), Liechtenstein (1), Nepal (3), Poland (1), Russia (1), and Rwanda (1),

Argentina

steinrenate@gmx.net

Bosnia

plamenmz@yahoo.ca

ekarabeg@bih.net.ba

Cameroon

verkini@yahoo.com

Canada

www.amcs.ca

Guatemala

www.aktenamit.org

Kenya

grootsk@grootskenya.org

Lichtenstein

www.muetterzentrum.li

Nepal

urc@lumanti.wlink.com.np

Poland

a.tkaczynska@imd.org.pl

Russia

gpsapozhnikova@online.stack.net

Rwanda

murugocentre@yahoo.fr