

# Mother Centres: Rebuilding Social Cohesion in a Fragmented World

by /[VlonikoJoecket](#)

Urbanization, rural-to-urban migration, industrialization and modernization have resulted in the erosion of traditional family, community and kin networks in different regions of the world. Contemporary societies in the East, West, North and South are undergoing a breakdown of social cohesion. Especially in urban environments, care-giving for children, the frail and the elderly is breaking down or is being delegated to already over-loaded residues of kin networks, or to institutions badly equipped to create humane and favourable caring conditions.

In urban centers of the South, limited job opportunities, rising living costs, poverty and the rapid spread of [HIV/AIDS](#) have placed an increasing burden on women and the family unit. More and more women are becoming single heads of households. Increasing violence is eroding community trust, and the breakdown of the traditional village and family social networks means that there are fewer support systems in place to help women and their families when they run into difficulties. In informal settlements families cannot afford home help and [childcare](#) which means that children are often left alone to play in the streets or at home, while women attend to their business or informal employment. Alternatively, women take their toddlers with them to their work in the informal market, which poses an accident hazard for children.

In the North, care givers are experiencing increasing [marginalization](#) and isolation in urban environments. The difficulties in reconciling work and family obligations result in issues like a continuous decline of birth rates and the [ghettoization](#) and [institutionalization](#) of care for the elderly.

Mother Centres' are a grassroots response to these global issues. They recreate family and neighbourhood structures where they have been eroded, they reinforce care-giving as a collective responsibility of communities and reintegrate the culture of care into public life and public policy. They create a political voice, challenging municipalities to create urban infrastructure that fits the needs of [ofcaregivers](#). Originating in Germany, they have since spread into 15 countries, including countries like the Czech

Republic, Bosnia, Bulgaria, Rwanda, Kenya, the Philippines, Canada and the USA.

Mother Centres are frequented by parents from many ethnic backgrounds and nationalities, as the issues of parenting in urban environments cuts across ethnic, cultural and social lines. They contribute to the integration of migrant families and promote a greater mutual understanding of migrant and mainstream culture.

Single mothers are an increasing part of the urban population and the urban poor. Mother Centers include programmes for single mothers that help them develop everyday survival skills, find employment and develop financial self sufficiency with projects like budget counselling, peer savings groups, skills trainings and job re-entry programmes.

In the densely populated slum of [Mathare](#), in Nairobi, Kenya, a Mother Centre has been initiated that provides a safe space for women and their children. Support to families, especially those whose children are malnourished, sick or at a high risk of becoming street children, is provided. There are also adult literacy and health education programmes on HIV/AIDS, family planning, menopause and puberty. Courses in marketing, bookkeeping and feasibility studies support income generating activities. Childcare is provided when mothers go about their business and there is a meal programme for young children.

In the inner city of Stuttgart, Germany, the Mother Center is an animated meeting point in the neighbourhood for all cultures and all generations. Childcare is offered to all ages, from toddlers to school children. [Eldercare](#) includes daytime mobile care as well as housekeeping, elder escort services and [intergenerational](#) activities. A wide range of close to home services has evolved to support parents in their work-family balance, including pick up services, meal services, laundry and sewing services, janitor and repair services, second hand shop, [wellness](#) and sport programs and job re-entry programmes.

In the city of [Zavidovici](#) in Bosnia a Mother Center provides women with a place to join forces in reconstructing their devastated and war-torn community. A gardening project, a sewing and handicraft

[Project. Children's as well as health programmes help reduce the trauma and improve the livelihoods of survivors.](#)

[Mother Centers increase the sustainability of cities at many levels.](#)

- They raise [political awareness on the role of grassroots groups](#) and neighbourhood initiatives for the reconciliation of work and family life
- They contribute to developing [and extending the range and quality of care services for dependants, including children, the elderly, the frail, sick and the handicapped.](#)
- They raise the status of care work in contemporary societies.
- They contribute to [reweaving](#) the social fabric and to strengthening the social cohesion in urban environments.
- They integrate the issues of families and [caregivers](#) into local governance
- They favour multi-ethnic integration
- They contribute to reducing urban poverty

*Monica Jaeckel, a senior researcher at the German Youth Institute in Munich, Germany, and founder of the Grassroots Women's International Academy (GWIA), is Chair of Mother Centres International Network (mine).*

## Reference

<sup>1</sup> Mother Centres exist in 16 countries. The Mother Centres International Network ([mine](#)) has won the [Dubai International Award 2002 for Best Practices to Improve the Living Environment for strengthening the capacity of civil society to revitalise local neighbourhood", and revive community life.](#)