

Stronger communities start with care—discover how Mother Centers, municipalities, Caring Communities can build a more resilient, inclusive Europe together.

Transition into a Caring Europe

Policy recommendations and Strategy Paper

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Policy recommendations
and
Strategy Paper 'Transition into a Caring Europe'

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Policy Recommendations

Based on the Strategy Paper 'Transition into a Caring Europe'

Executive summary

Europe faces interconnected demographic, social, and ecological crises that directly impact municipalities' and communities' ability to provide care and ensure well-being. This policy paper builds on the findings of the strategy paper "*Transition into a Caring Europe*", as well as decades of grassroots experience from Mother Centers active in Danube Region countries. It presents practical recommendations tailored for municipalities and the Danube Region Interreg Programme.

At the heart of this approach are Mother Centers (MCs) and caring local communities—community-based hubs that promote care, social inclusion, and local resilience. Our strategy is grounded in the recognition that the ongoing “policrises” can only be addressed effectively through integrated, place-based solutions. These require closer, more strategic collaboration between changing populations and their municipalities.

This vision emphasizes the inclusion of all local residents. In the face of growing social, economic, and environmental challenges. We, as society, cannot afford to overlook the potential of any person, group, or helping hand—especially those traditionally labelled as "disadvantaged." We believe that everyone matters. To respond to today's complex crises, we need local social infrastructures that are inclusive by design and that offer tangible, pragmatic answers for all.

At the same time, it is important to recognize that countries of the Danube Region differ significantly in their economic capacities, political priorities, and policy approaches to social care and community well-being. In some contexts, community-based initiatives are strongly supported by local or national governments, while in others such efforts receive little recognition or funding. These disparities shape the opportunities and constraints for municipalities and civil society actors across the region. The recommendations in this paper are therefore formulated with these differences in mind, offering a flexible framework that can be adapted to diverse national realities while still promoting shared goals of care, inclusion, and resilience.

Key Challenges

1. **Ageing population and rural depopulation**

Municipalities across Europe are facing rising old-age dependency ratios and a shrinking working-age population, especially in rural areas. These demographic changes threaten the sustainability of local economies and social services, placing additional pressure on care infrastructure and municipal budgets.

2. **Social diversity management and democratic deficit**

Increasing social divisions and the rise of populism undermine democratic cohesion in both urban and rural contexts. A lack of inclusive and participatory local governance deepens mistrust in institutions and contributes to political disengagement, particularly among marginalized or underrepresented groups.

3. **Care and mental health crises**

The burden on informal caregivers—particularly middle-aged women—continues to grow, often without adequate institutional support. This leads to caregiver burnout, financial strain, and widespread mental health issues, while municipalities struggle to meet the rising demand for accessible, community-based care and mental health services.

4. **Social isolation and changing demographics**

Young mothers frequently face social isolation, economic insecurity, and limited access to affordable childcare—especially in underserved regions. At the same time, members of the “sandwich generation,” particularly women caring for both children and elderly parents, are increasingly unable to meet society’s growing care needs, leading to significant gaps in social support.

5. **Climate and ecological crises**

Extreme weather events, severe droughts, and environmental degradation are escalating in many Danube Region countries. These challenges jeopardize food security, strain local infrastructure, and disproportionately affect vulnerable populations, highlighting the need for climate adaptation strategies at the municipal level.

6. **Policrises – interconnected structural crises**

Housing shortages, climate-related disruptions, care system failures, and fragmented social services interact to form a complex web of systemic risks. These overlapping crises—referred to as “policrises”—demand integrated, cross-sectoral approaches that strengthen local resilience and capacity for coordinated action.

Strategic role of Mother Centers and Caring Communities

Mother Centers (MCs) and Caring Communities are inclusive, community-driven spaces—both physical and online—that play a vital role in addressing the care crisis and enhancing local resilience. Rooted in grassroots activism and supported by decades of practical experience, these centers provide flexible, needs-based support that adapts to the changing realities of families, caregivers, and communities.

Their core functions include:

- **Facilitating social connection and peer support**, helping to reduce isolation and build trust among residents.
- **Providing skill-building, job readiness, and employment support**, particularly for women returning to the labor market.
- **Offering mental health education, psychoeducation and informal counseling**, often filling gaps where formal services are underdeveloped or inaccessible.
- **Promoting intergenerational and intercultural dialogue**, which strengthens social cohesion and mutual understanding across age and cultural groups.
- **When partnering with municipalities**, co-delivering care, education, and integration services, and responding flexibly to community needs.

Over the years, MCs have demonstrated their ability to foster inclusion, resilience, and well-being at the local level. They hold significant potential to be further developed into efficient, trusted service and solution partners for municipalities. With appropriate support and recognition, they can play a central role in integrated local strategies aimed at addressing the interconnected structural challenges—the so-called *policrises*—that affect communities across Europe.

Their model is pragmatic, participatory, and scalable—making them well-positioned to contribute to sustainable, community-based solutions aligned with both social cohesion and democratic renewal.

Policy Recommendations

1. Foster Municipal–Community Partnerships

- Encourage co-financing and co-management models between municipalities and MCs.
- Provide public infrastructure (e.g. buildings, utilities) to community initiatives in exchange for social services provision and climate-change response.
- Recognize MCs as formal actors in local welfare ecosystems.

2. Include Mother Centers and Caring Communities in Regional Development Planning

- Integrate MCs into the Danube Region Interreg programme’s strategic objectives on social innovation, demographic change, and territorial cohesion.
- Fund pilot MCs in rural and disadvantaged urban areas with clear impact indicators (e.g. increased female employment, improved mental health, improved biodiversity protection).

3. Support intergenerational and gender-responsive solutions

- Promote intergenerational care strategies through MCs to relieve the burden on the “sandwich generation.”
- Ensure gender-sensitive municipal planning by including caregivers in local policy consultations.
- Expand MC models to include programs for young fathers, grandparents, and migrants.

4. Strengthen social and economic capital locally

- Equip MCs with resources for entrepreneurship support, job training, and digital literacy.
- Embed MCs into municipal emergency and climate resilience planning (e.g. as heatwave shelters or mental health first-response hubs).

5. Develop monitoring and knowledge-sharing mechanisms

- Launch a regional platform under the Danube Interreg umbrella for municipalities to exchange best practices on MC cooperation.
- Fund longitudinal impact studies on MCs to support data-driven policymaking.

Call to action for the Danube Region Interreg Programme

The Danube Region Interreg Programme should:

- Initiate a **Thematic Call for Community Care Models**, funding the establishment and networking of MCs across participating countries.
- Prioritize cross-border learning and scaling of successful MC and Caring Community projects (e.g. from Germany, Slovakia, Austria, Hungary, Serbia, Bosnia-Herzegovina etc.).
- Align MC-related funding with EU Green Deal, Just Transition, and Social Rights Pillar targets.

Conclusion

Building a “Caring Europe” begins at the local level. Municipalities — supported by transnational programmes such as the Danube Region Interreg Programme — have a unique opportunity to institutionalize care, resilience, and social inclusion by investing in community-based infrastructure like Mother Centers and Caring Communities.

The Danube Region, where Western, Eastern, and Southern European countries converge, presents a particularly strategic area. This region embodies a rich diversity of economic, social, and cultural contexts, each facing distinct challenges yet offering valuable opportunities for synergy. By fostering cooperation across borders and sectors, the Danube Region can serve as a model for the European Union in promoting integrated responses to shared challenges.

Furthermore, targeted support for local community initiatives can help counter rising populism and democratic disengagement by bridging divides and empowering residents to take part in shaping their futures. Strengthening cross-border networks of Caring Communities not only enhances local capacity but also reinforces European solidarity from the bottom up.

Investing in inclusive, participatory, and place-based approaches will not only help address the multiple interlinked crises we face today, but also lay the foundation for a more sustainable, equitable, and socially cohesive Europe.

Transition into a caring Europe

Strategy paper to promote Community and Municipality cooperation in Europe

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Context

Europe is undergoing a profound transformation shaped by overlapping demographic, ecological, social, and political shifts. Ageing populations, declining birth rates, growing urban–rural divides, and increased migration flows present municipalities with complex challenges that strain care systems, social cohesion, and economic resilience. At the same time, multiple interconnected crises—including the care, housing, mental health, and climate crises—create mounting pressure on local governments and communities. These compound crises, or *policrises*, demand holistic, community-driven responses.

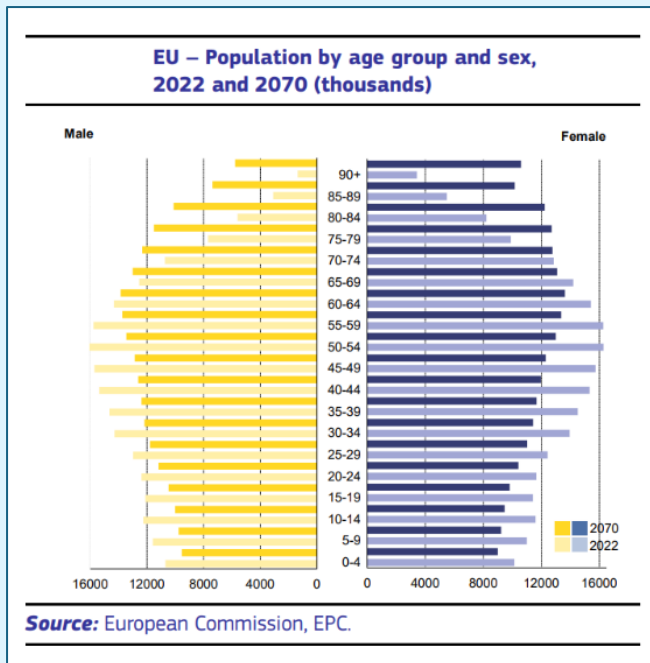
In this context, the strategy paper "*Transition into a Caring Europe*" calls for a shift in how care, community resilience, and social inclusion are approached at the local level. It highlights the untapped potential of grassroots structures—especially Mother Centers (MCs)—to serve as dynamic hubs of support, engagement, and innovation. With decades of experience in the Danube Region and across Europe, MCs have proven effective in bridging gaps in care provision, strengthening intergenerational solidarity, promoting gender equality, and reinforcing democratic participation.

The strategy responds directly to the urgent need for stronger cooperation between municipalities and communities. It argues that sustainable and equitable solutions to Europe's crises must begin from the ground up—through inclusive, local infrastructures of care that are co-created by residents and supported by local authorities. In particular, it identifies the Danube Region as a strategic laboratory for these transformations: a place where East, West, and South Europe intersect; where diverse socio-economic realities collide; and where cross-border collaboration offers the potential to pilot new models of integration, solidarity, and innovation.

This strategy aligns with broader European objectives under the Green Deal, Social Rights Pillar, and Just Transition frameworks. It advocates for a Caring Europe built not only on economic efficiency and ecological sustainability, but also on mutual support, dignity, and active citizenship. It calls on municipalities, national governments, and EU programmes—especially the Danube Region Interreg—to recognize and invest in community infrastructures like Mother Centers as key partners in shaping a resilient and inclusive European future.

The demographic situation of Europe

The demographic situation in Europe is characterized by significant trends in population ageing, urbanization, and rural depopulation, which together shape the social and economic landscape of the continent. As the population ages, the implications for social services, healthcare, and economic productivity become increasingly pronounced. This demographic shift is not uniform across urban and rural areas, leading to distinct challenges and opportunities in different regions.



Europe is experiencing a notable increase in the proportion of older adults, particularly those aged 65 and over. This demographic trend is driven by rising life expectancy and declining birth rates, resulting in a higher dependency ratio, where fewer working-age individuals support a growing elderly population (Marois et al., 2020). The ageing population poses challenges for pension systems, healthcare services, and labor markets, as a shrinking workforce may struggle to sustain economic growth and support the needs of an older demographic

(Marois et al., 2020). The concept of "70 is the new 60" reflects a cultural shift in perceptions of ageing, yet the critical indicator remains the proportion of **the population over 65, which continues to rise alarmingly in** many European countries (Marois et al., 2020).

The EU population is projected to start falling in the coming years while the number of older people rises, especially relative to the number of people at working age. The EU population is expected to rise from 449 million people in 2022 to a peak of 453 million people in 2026, before falling to 432 million in 2070. This is a decline by 4% compared to 2022. At the same time, a strong upward shift in the age distribution is expected in all Member States. The size of the older age groups would grow, while the younger age brackets would shrink. The few countries where the working-age population (people aged 20 to 64) is projected to increase would see an even greater increase in the population aged 65 or more. (European Commission, 2024)

As a result, the old-age dependency ratio will rise sharply in all Member States over the coming decades. The old-age dependency ratio is the ratio of the old-age population to the working-age population. This ratio gives an idea about the relative shift between potential retirees and potential workers and thus of how an ageing population alters the balance between beneficiaries and contributors. From about 29% in 2010 in the EU, it rose to 36% in 2022 and would rise further to 59% in 2070, with most of the increase expected already by 2045. Put differently, the EU would go from having nearly thirty people aged 20 to 64 for every ten people aged over 65 years in 2022, to having less than twenty people by 2045. (European Commission, 2024)

The situation of middle-aged women (ages 50–65) in the European Union, particularly in relation to the care crisis and the challenges associated with being part of the "sandwich generation," is increasingly alarming. This demographic is often caught between the dual responsibilities of caring for ageing parents and supporting their adult

children, while simultaneously facing significant challenges related to their own health, economic status, and social well-being.

Urban areas in Europe tend to attract younger populations due to better job opportunities, educational institutions, and amenities. This urban migration exacerbates the demographic divide between urban and rural areas. Urban centers are often characterized by a more diverse population, with higher proportions of young adults and immigrants, which can contribute to economic dynamism and innovation (Sutherland, 2010). Conversely, rural areas are experiencing significant depopulation as younger residents move to cities in search of better prospects, leaving behind an ageing population that may struggle with access to healthcare, social services, and economic opportunities (Marois et al., 2020).

The differences between urban and rural demographics are stark. Urban areas typically have a higher concentration of services, including healthcare and educational facilities, which cater to a younger, more mobile population. In contrast, rural areas often face challenges related to service provision, with limited access to healthcare and educational resources, which can hinder the development of human capital (Branjerdporn et al., 2022). This disparity in service availability can lead to a cycle of decline in rural areas, where ageing populations may not receive adequate support, further driving younger individuals away (McLellan & Laidlaw, 2013).

Moreover, the ageing population in rural areas is particularly concerning, as older adults in these regions may experience isolation and limited access to social networks. The lack of transportation and healthcare facilities can exacerbate feelings of loneliness and reduce the quality of life for elderly residents (Penderi & Petrogiannis, 2011). In contrast, urban areas, while also facing issues of isolation, often have more robust community support systems and social services that can help mitigate these challenges (Jochim et al., 2022).

The economic implications of these demographic trends are significant. In urban areas, the influx of younger populations can stimulate economic growth and innovation, as diverse talents and ideas converge (Vukojevic, 2023). However, the ageing population in rural areas can lead to labor shortages and increased pressure on social services, as fewer working-age individuals are available to support the elderly (Asif et al., 2019). This demographic imbalance necessitates targeted policies that address the unique needs of both urban and rural populations, ensuring that resources are allocated effectively to support economic and social well-being across regions.

Furthermore, the demographic situation in Europe is influenced by migration patterns, which can both alleviate and exacerbate the challenges associated with ageing populations. Immigration can introduce younger individuals into the workforce, helping to balance the demographic scales in ageing societies (Vik & DeGroot, 2021). However, the integration of immigrants into local communities can also present challenges, particularly in terms of social cohesion and access to services (Weaver et al., 2013).

Municipalities must navigate these complexities to foster inclusive environments that support both native and immigrant populations.

Among these demographic transitions the interconnected nature of the care crisis, housing crisis, climate and ecological crises, and mental health crisis, also called policrisis, profoundly affects communities and municipalities in the EU. As these crises compound one another, there is an urgent need for local governments to prioritize resource allocation, develop innovative policies, and foster community engagement that enhances resilience and reinforces social safety nets. Addressing these multifaceted challenges holistically is crucial for promoting sustainable community development and ensuring the well-being of all residents.

In conclusion, the demographic situation in Europe is marked by an ageing population, urban-rural disparities, migration dynamics and the policrises, that together shape the continent's social and economic landscape. Addressing these challenges requires a nuanced understanding of the distinct needs of urban and rural populations, as well as targeted policies that promote social cohesion, economic growth, community-resilience and the well-being of all residents. As Europe continues to grapple with these demographic shifts, the importance of fostering resilient communities that can adapt to changing circumstances becomes increasingly clear.

Economic, social and mental health situation of young mothers in Europe

The economic, social, and mental health situation of young mothers in Europe is complex and multifaceted, reflecting broader societal trends and challenges. Young mothers often face significant barriers that can impact their well-being and the well-being of their children.

The decline in birth rates in the European Union and the reluctance of young women to have children stem from a complex interplay of economic conditions, evolving societal norms, and mental health considerations. Addressing these challenges requires a multi-faceted approach, including policy interventions that promote family-friendly work conditions and greater support for mental health services. By fostering an environment that encourages the balance of personal ambitions with family life, societies can work toward reversing the trend of declining birth rates while respecting individual choices regarding reproductive health. (Hill et al., 2020)

Economic Situation

Young mothers in Europe frequently encounter economic challenges that can hinder their ability to provide for their families. Many young mothers are at a higher risk of experiencing poverty due to factors such as limited educational attainment, lack of

stable employment, and the high costs associated with raising children (Jack et al. 2022). Research indicates that young mothers are often more likely to be unemployed or underemployed compared to their older counterparts, which can exacerbate financial insecurity (Agnafors et al., 2019). The economic pressures faced by young mothers can lead to reliance on social welfare systems, which may not always provide adequate support to meet their needs (Lucas et al., 2019).

Moreover, the intersection of age and socioeconomic status can create additional vulnerabilities. Young mothers from lower socioeconomic backgrounds may face compounded challenges, including limited access to quality childcare, which can restrict their ability to pursue education or employment opportunities (King et al., 2019). This economic disadvantage can perpetuate a cycle of poverty, affecting not only the mothers but also their children, who may experience poorer developmental outcomes as a result (Brand et al., 2014).

Social Situation

Social support is crucial for young mothers, as it can significantly influence their overall well-being. However, many young mothers report feelings of isolation and stigma, which can hinder their ability to form supportive networks (Brand et al., 2015). The societal perception of young motherhood often carries negative connotations, leading to feelings of judgment and exclusion from mainstream social circles (Severinsen, 2024). This stigma can deter young mothers from seeking help or engaging with community resources, further exacerbating their sense of isolation.

Community services play a vital role in providing social support to young mothers. Programs that facilitate peer connections and offer parenting education can help mitigate feelings of isolation and foster a sense of belonging (Omobowale et al., 2023). Research has shown that participation in mothers' groups and community activities is associated with increased social capital and improved mental well-being among young mothers (Strange et al., 2015). These social networks can provide emotional support, practical assistance, and a platform for sharing experiences, which are essential for navigating the challenges of motherhood.

Mental Health Situation

Mental health is a critical concern for young mothers in Europe, with many experiencing higher rates of mental health issues compared to older mothers. Factors such as the stress of parenting, economic hardship, and social isolation can contribute to the development of mental health problems, including depression and anxiety (Agnafors et al., 2019; Racine et al., 2021). Studies have indicated that young mothers are particularly vulnerable to postpartum depression, and the presence of limited social support can exacerbate this risk (King et al., 2019; Kola et al., 2020).

The stigma surrounding mental health issues can further complicate the situation for young mothers. Many may feel reluctant to seek help due to fears of being judged or labeled as inadequate parents (Severinsen, 2024). Access to mental health services is often limited, particularly for those from marginalized backgrounds, which can hinder timely intervention and support (Kola et al., 2021). Research emphasizes the need for healthcare providers to be aware of the unique mental health challenges faced by young mothers and to create supportive environments that encourage help-seeking behavior (Agnafors et al., 2019; Goddard-Durant, 2023).

Innovative approaches to mental health support, such as community-based interventions and online support groups, have shown promise in improving the mental health outcomes of young mothers (McManus-Shipp, 2024; Rosenblum et al., 2017). These initiatives can provide accessible resources and foster connections among mothers, helping to reduce feelings of isolation and promote resilience.

In summary, young mothers in Europe face a range of economic, social, and mental health challenges that can significantly impact their lives and the lives of their children. Addressing these issues requires a multifaceted approach that includes enhancing access to education and employment opportunities, reducing stigma, and providing robust social support systems. By fostering supportive communities and improving access to mental health resources, society can better support young mothers in navigating the complexities of motherhood and achieving positive outcomes for themselves and their families.

What are Mother Centers?

Mother centers, also known as community centers for mothers, serve as vital support systems for mothers and their families. These centers provide a range of services and resources aimed at enhancing maternal and child health, promoting social connections, and fostering community engagement. The concept of mother centers is rooted in the recognition of the unique challenges faced by mothers, particularly in the context of modern societal pressures, economic constraints, and the need for social support (Jaeckel et al., 1997).

One of the primary functions of mother centers is to offer educational resources and workshops that empower mothers with knowledge about child-rearing practices, health, and nutrition. For instance, studies have shown that mothers often seek information on breastfeeding, child development, and parenting strategies Bogen et al. (2004). Mother centers can facilitate access to this information through workshops led by healthcare professionals, nutritionists, and experienced mothers. Such educational initiatives are crucial in promoting positive health outcomes for both mothers and their children, as they provide evidence-based guidance on essential topics (Habibi et al., 2018).

In addition to educational resources, mother centers serve as community hubs that foster social connections among mothers. The importance of social support for mothers cannot be overstated, as it has been linked to improved mental health outcomes and overall well-being (Laux et al., 2022). By creating opportunities for mothers to connect with one another, share experiences, and build friendships, mother centers help mitigate feelings of isolation and stress that many mothers face, particularly those who are new to parenting or who may be experiencing postpartum depression (Simhi et al., 2019). This social network can be invaluable in providing emotional support and practical assistance, such as childcare exchanges or shared resources (Laux et al., 2022).

Furthermore, mother centers often provide access to mental health services, which are critical for addressing issues such as postpartum depression and anxiety. Research indicates that many mothers prefer community-based treatment options for mental health concerns, as these settings can offer a more supportive and understanding environment compared to traditional healthcare facilities (Simhi et al., 2019). By integrating mental health services into their offerings, mother centers can play a crucial role in promoting the psychological well-being of mothers and their families (Laux et al., 2022).

Economic empowerment is another key aspect of the services provided by mother centers. Many centers offer programs that focus on skill development, job training, and financial literacy, which are essential for helping mothers achieve economic independence (Villegas et al., 2016). By equipping mothers with the skills needed to enter or re-enter the workforce, mother centers contribute to the overall economic stability of families, which can have long-term positive effects on child development and family well-being (Basílio et al., 2005). This focus on economic empowerment is particularly important for single mothers or those from low-income backgrounds, who may face additional barriers to employment.

Moreover, mother centers can serve as advocates for policies that support mothers and families. By engaging in community organizing and advocacy efforts, these centers can influence local policies related to maternal and child health, childcare access, and family support services (Laux et al., 2022). This advocacy work is essential in addressing systemic issues that affect mothers, such as inadequate maternity leave policies, lack of affordable childcare, and limited access to healthcare services (Shahraki et al., 2018). By amplifying the voices of mothers and highlighting their needs, mother centers can contribute to creating a more supportive environment for families.

The role of mother centers extends beyond individual support to encompass broader community development. By fostering social cohesion and community engagement, these centers can help build resilient communities that are better equipped to address the challenges faced by families. Research has shown that strong community ties are associated with improved health outcomes and greater overall well-being. By serving as a focal point for community activities and initiatives, mother centers can enhance social capital and promote a sense of belonging among residents.

In conclusion, mother centers are essential community resources that provide a wide range of services aimed at supporting mothers and their families. Through education, social support, mental health services, economic empowerment, and advocacy, these centers play a crucial role in enhancing maternal and child health, fostering social connections, and promoting community well-being. As society continues to evolve, the importance of mother centers in addressing the unique challenges faced by mothers will only grow, making them a vital component of community health and development strategies.

Social benefits of mother centers

Mother centers are community spaces that serve as vital social infrastructures that provide numerous benefits to mothers and their families. These spaces foster social support, enhance maternal well-being, and facilitate access to essential resources, ultimately contributing to healthier communities.

One of the primary social benefits of mother centers is the provision of a supportive environment where mothers can connect with one another. Research indicates that social support is crucial for mothers, particularly in managing the challenges of motherhood. For instance, mothers often seek emotional and material support from their social networks, which can alleviate feelings of isolation and stress associated with parenting (Beyers-Carlson et al., 2022). Additionally, community spaces enable mothers to share experiences and advice, fostering a sense of belonging and community (Withanage et al., 2020). This peer support is particularly beneficial for first-time mothers, who may feel overwhelmed by the demands of new parenthood (Withanage et al., 2020).

In addition to direct support and education, mother centers play a critical role in addressing the broader social determinants of health. They can serve as hubs for community engagement and advocacy, promoting policies that benefit families and children (D'Arcy et al., 2011). For instance, community spaces, MCs can facilitate discussions on maternal mental health, thereby reducing stigma and encouraging mothers to seek help when needed (Simhi et al., 2019). Furthermore, these centers can act as platforms for intergenerational support, where older mothers share their wisdom and experiences with younger mothers, fostering a culture of mutual aid and resilience (Flores, 2018).

The impact of mother centers extends beyond individual mothers to the community as a whole. By promoting social cohesion and interaction among diverse groups, these spaces can enhance community well-being and resilience. They serve as "social bridges," connecting different social groups and fostering inclusivity, which is particularly important in multicultural societies. The presence of green spaces and community centers has been associated with improved mental health outcomes and

increased community participation, further underscoring their importance in promoting social benefits (Vaznonienė & Vaznonis, 2018).

In summary, mother centers and community spaces provide essential social benefits by fostering connections among mothers, offering educational resources, addressing social determinants of health, and enhancing community cohesion. These spaces not only support individual mothers but also contribute to the overall health and well-being of the community.

Gender issues affecting care and caring communities

The feminist critique of society has long illuminated the systemic inequalities that persist in various social structures, particularly those affecting women and mothers. This critique highlights how patriarchal norms and capitalist frameworks often marginalize women's voices, experiences, and needs, leading to a societal landscape that can be hostile to mothers and their well-being. In this context, mother centers emerge as a vital solution, providing a supportive environment that challenges these oppressive structures and fosters empowerment among mothers.

Feminist scholars have critiqued the traditional liberal democratic view of the state, arguing that it often fails to address the unique needs of women, particularly in the context of motherhood (Kimura, 2012). This critique emphasizes the necessity for "counterpublics" that can create and circulate alternative discourses, thereby expanding the spaces in which women's voices can be heard and valued (Kimura, 2012). Mother centers can serve as these counterpublics, offering a platform where mothers can share their experiences, advocate for their needs, and collectively challenge societal norms that undermine their roles. By fostering community engagement and dialogue, these centers can empower mothers to reclaim their narratives and assert their rights within a patriarchal society.

Moreover, the feminist critique of media and cultural narratives often reveals how dominant discourses perpetuate stereotypes and marginalize women's experiences (Mendes, 2011). This is particularly evident in the portrayal of motherhood, which is frequently idealized or criticized without acknowledging the complexities and challenges that mothers face. Mother centers can counteract these narratives by providing a space for mothers to share their stories authentically, thereby challenging the hegemonic representations of motherhood. Through workshops, discussions, and community events, mothers can articulate their realities, fostering a more nuanced understanding of motherhood that transcends simplistic stereotypes.

The intersection of motherhood and civil society is another area where feminist critiques highlight the need for systemic change. Feminist movements have historically sought to challenge the exclusion of women's voices from public discourse and decision-making processes (Moon, 2002). Mother centers can play a crucial role in this regard by serving as hubs for activism and advocacy. They can mobilize mothers to

engage in community organizing, policy advocacy, and social justice initiatives that address the systemic barriers they face. By empowering mothers to become active participants in civil society, these centers can contribute to a broader feminist agenda that seeks to dismantle patriarchal structures and promote gender equity.

Furthermore, the feminist standpoint theory posits that women's experiences and perspectives are essential for understanding social realities (Gurung, 2020). This perspective underscores the importance of creating spaces where mothers can articulate their unique challenges and insights. Mother centers can facilitate this by providing resources and support for mothers to engage in critical reflection and dialogue about their experiences. By valuing women's voices and experiences, these centers can contribute to a more inclusive understanding of social issues, ultimately leading to more effective solutions that address the needs of mothers and families.

In addition to fostering empowerment and advocacy, mother centers can also serve as sites of resistance against the commodification of motherhood and the pressures of neoliberal capitalism (Laux et al., 2022). Feminist critiques of capitalism highlight how market-driven ideologies often prioritize profit over the well-being of individuals and families (Haavind & Magusson, 2005). Mother centers can challenge this commodification by promoting community-based support systems that prioritize relational care and mutual aid over transactional relationships. By fostering a culture of solidarity and cooperation, these centers can help mothers navigate the challenges of motherhood in a way that resists the isolating effects of neoliberalism.

The need for mother centers is particularly pressing in the context of contemporary societal challenges, such as economic inequality, mental health crises, and the ongoing impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. Feminist critiques of austerity measures and their disproportionate impact on women underscore the urgency of creating supportive spaces for mothers (Calkin, 2015). Mother centers can provide essential resources, such as mental health support, parenting education, and access to social services, thereby addressing the immediate needs of mothers while also advocating for systemic change.

Moreover, the intersectional nature of feminist critiques emphasizes that the experiences of mothers are shaped by various factors, including race, class, and sexuality (Volk, 2022). Mother centers can serve as inclusive spaces that recognize and address these intersecting identities, ensuring that all mothers have access to the support and resources they need. By fostering an intersectional approach, these centers can challenge the dominant narratives that often overlook the diverse experiences of mothers, thereby promoting a more equitable and just society.

In conclusion, the feminist critique of society reveals the systemic inequalities that persist in the treatment of mothers and their needs. Mother centers emerge as a vital solution, providing a supportive environment that empowers mothers, challenges oppressive narratives, and fosters community engagement. By serving as counterpublics, advocating for systemic change, and promoting intersectional

inclusivity, mother centers can play a crucial role in advancing the feminist agenda and creating a more equitable society for all.

Care, housing, climate, ecological, mental health crises (policrises) and their impact on communities and municipalities

The intersection of multiple crises—namely the care crisis, housing crisis, climate crisis, ecological crisis, and mental health crisis—significantly impacts communities and municipalities across the European Union. Each of these crises interacts with the others, exacerbating existing challenges and creating new risks for local populations (Bdier et al. 2024).

Care Crisis

The care crisis encompasses the difficulties related to providing adequate care for children, the elderly, and those with disabilities. As demographics shift, with an increasing proportion of older adults requiring long-term care, municipalities face mounting pressure to develop sustainable care infrastructures. This situation is particularly taxing on middle-aged women, who often serve as informal caregivers while balancing work and family responsibilities. The lack of formal support systems leads to caregiver burnout and financial strain, pushing local governments to re-evaluate how they allocate resources to support families.

Communities are also faced with the challenge of ensuring that vulnerable populations receive the necessary assistance. The care crisis can result in heightened mental health issues within communities, as those fulfilling caregiving roles often experience increased stress and anxiety. With insufficient support from municipalities, the intergenerational transfer of care responsibilities can lead to further systemic inequities and social isolation among caregivers (Jaeckel et al., 1997).

Housing Crisis

The housing crisis, characterized by rising rental prices, homelessness, and inadequate housing quality, poses significant challenges for municipalities. This situation is especially urgent in economically disadvantaged areas, where individuals and families often find themselves at risk of displacement or living in overcrowded conditions. The financial burden of housing can lead to decreased spending in other areas, affecting local economies and exacerbating the care crisis as families struggle to allocate resources for childcare or eldercare.

Moreover, the housing crisis can exacerbate social inequalities, as marginalized groups are disproportionately affected by housing instability. In turn, these challenges can strain municipal services, as increased housing insecurity often leads to heightened demand for social services, public health support, and crisis intervention. In response, municipalities must seek innovative solutions to address the shortfall in affordable housing and enhance community resilience (Zacharenko, 2022).

Climate and Ecological Crises

The climate and ecological crises have profound implications for communities in the EU, leading to an increased frequency of extreme weather events, loss of biodiversity, and deteriorating environmental conditions. The lack of water and severe draught events are growing problems in Central and Southern Europe. These environmental challenges not only threaten food security, physical safety and health but also impact mental health and community cohesion. Research suggests that communities facing ecological degradation often experience heightened stress and anxiety due to concerns about environmental sustainability and personal safety. (Bdier et al. 2024)

Additionally, the climate crisis exacerbates existing economic vulnerabilities, particularly in communities reliant on agriculture or tourism, which may be severely affected by changing climate patterns. Municipalities need to incorporate climate resilience strategies into their urban planning and community development initiatives, ensuring that local populations are prepared for future environmental challenges.

Mental Health Crisis

The cumulative effects of the care, housing, and climate crises are particularly evident in the realm of mental health. As communities face increasing uncertainty and stress, mental health issues among residents are likely to rise. Studies have shown that economic instability, social isolation, and caregiving burdens contribute to higher rates of anxiety and depression within populations. Furthermore, the stigma surrounding mental health often prevents individuals from seeking the help they need, complicating the efforts of municipalities to provide adequate support.

To mitigate the fallout from these intersecting crises, municipalities must prioritize mental health services, and community-based solutions to ensuring that resources are allocated effectively to address the mental well-being of their residents. Community engagement and support systems, such as peer-led initiatives and accessible mental health resources, are essential for fostering resilience and improving overall community health (Casado et al., 2021).

Situation of middle aged (50-65 years old) women in the EU in relation to the care crisis and the "sandwich generation"

The situation of middle-aged women in the EU, particularly in terms of their roles within the care crisis and as members of the "sandwich generation," presents complex challenges that require urgent attention. Economic vulnerabilities, social isolation, and mental health concerns all intersect to create a precarious environment for these women. Addressing these issues necessitates a comprehensive approach that includes enhanced support systems for caregivers, policies that recognize the contributions of women in caregiving roles, and accessible mental health services. As policymakers grapple with the care crisis, the unique experiences of middle-aged women must be integrated into broader discussions about social and economic support structures within the EU.

Care Crisis and Economic Challenges

Middle-aged women in Europe are significantly impacted by the care crisis, characterized by inadequate support systems and increasing demands for caregiving. With demographic shifts leading to an ageing population, many middle-aged women find themselves responsible for elderly parents, which adds considerable strain to their economic situation. The caregiving responsibilities can limit their ability to participate fully in the workforce or to secure stable employment, leading to financial vulnerabilities (Zacharenko & Elomäki, 2022). Studies have shown that middle-aged women are disproportionately affected by economic instability, often resulting from caregiving duties that restrict their career growth and earning potential (Khakkar & Kazemi, 2023).

The care crisis is exacerbated by government policies that often fail to provide adequate resources or support for caregivers. Many middle-aged women report feelings of being overwhelmed due to the lack of assistance, both financially and in terms of available caregiving resources (Zacharenko, 2023). This systemic neglect can lead to a precarious economic situation, where women may have to reduce their working hours or leave employment altogether, further intensifying their financial insecurity (Carbó & García-Orellán, 2020).

Social Well-Being and the Sandwich Generation

The "sandwich generation" refers to those individuals who are simultaneously caring for their children and their ageing parents. For women in the EU, this can lead to increased social isolation and diminished social support (Abufaraj et al., 2021). Middle-aged women often report feeling isolated, as they juggle multiple roles and responsibilities, resulting in a lack of time for personal relationships and self-care (Carbó & García-Orellán, 2020). Many experience stress and anxiety from managing significant

obligations without sufficient societal recognition or support (Umamaheswar & Tan, 2020).

This social dynamic may also contribute to deteriorating mental health. Research indicates that the burdens of caregiving, coupled with the additional responsibilities of parenting adult children, can lead to increased rates of depression and anxiety among middle-aged women (Khakkar & Kazemi, 2023). As they strive to meet the expectations of both familial and societal roles, their own health and mental well-being can suffer, further complicating their ability to provide care (Lee & Lee, 2020).

Mental Health Considerations

Mental health is a critical component of the overall well-being of middle-aged women. Studies have shown that this demographic is at heightened risk for various mental health issues, such as anxiety and depression, particularly given the stressors linked to caregiving (Khakkar & Kazemi, 2023). Climacteric changes associated with menopause may further exacerbate these mental health challenges, impacting both their physical and emotional health (Kim et al., 2021).

Research has highlighted the need for mental health support tailored specifically to the challenges faced by middle-aged women. The importance of community-based interventions, group counseling, and access to mental health resources has been emphasized as essential for helping these women cope with their unique stressors (Seema et al., 2025). Additionally, promoting health-promoting behaviors, such as physical activity and social engagement, can play a crucial role in mitigating psychological distress among this group (Hua, 2012).

The importance of intergenerational approaches to address the policrises

Approaching contemporary crises—including the care crisis, housing crisis, climate crisis, ecological crisis, and mental health crisis—with an intergenerational lens is critical for building resilient communities. An intergenerational approach fosters collaboration and communication between different age groups, allowing for the sharing of knowledge, workforce, resources, and strategies to tackle complex problems that often disproportionately affect vulnerable populations.

Adopting an intergenerational approach to tackle the care, housing, climate, ecological, and mental health crises is essential for fostering resilient and cohesive communities. By promoting collaboration and dialogue between generations, municipalities can create supportive networks that mitigate the impacts of these crises and promote health and well-being for all. Additionally, intergenerational initiatives can lead to innovative solutions that draw on the strengths of diverse age groups, ensuring

that communities are well-prepared to face current and future challenges (European Commission, 2020).

Addressing the Care Crisis

The care crisis, marked by growing demands for both child and elder care, benefits significantly from intergenerational collaboration. Engaging older adults in caregiving roles can alleviate some of the pressures faced by parents of young children, while simultaneously providing meaningful involvement for seniors. For example, older generations may offer experience, wisdom, and stability, which can enhance the caregiving environment for younger families. Studies have demonstrated that when intergenerational dialogues take place around caregiving, both age groups experience positive outcomes, creating a supportive care network that transcends generational boundaries. This approach not only improves mental well-being but can also directly influence health outcomes for those involved. (European Commission, 2024)

Enhancing Housing Stability

The housing crisis, characterized by rising rents and limited affordable housing options, can also benefit from an intergenerational perspective. Engaging young adults and seniors in collective housing solutions, such as co-housing or community land trusts, can create inclusive living spaces that address the needs of both generations. Collaborative housing initiatives can promote interdependence, reduce isolation among seniors, and provide affordable living solutions for younger people. This synergy fosters social cohesion and reduces the burden on municipal resources, creating a more sustainable residential framework (European Commission, 2024).

Combating Climate and Ecological Challenges

Given the urgency of climate change, an intergenerational approach is imperative. Young people are often at the forefront of climate activism, while older generations hold a wealth of historical knowledge and experience in navigating societal changes. By merging these perspectives, municipalities can develop effective, inclusive climate policies that resonate across generations. Initiatives that encourage multigenerational partnerships in sustainability efforts—such as tree-planting programs, community gardens, and local environmental committees—empower individuals of all ages to contribute to climate resilience efforts. This collaboration fosters a shared sense of responsibility toward the environment and ensures that future generations inherit a healthier planet (European Environmental Agency, 2020).

Addressing Mental Health Crises

Mental health crises, particularly exacerbated by recent global challenges, necessitate an intergenerational approach to effectively address widespread psychological distress. Engaging young people, who might collaborate with older community members to create peer-support programs or mentorship networks, allows for the mutual sharing of experiences, coping strategies, and resilience techniques. Research indicates that cross-generational interactions—including shared activities and dialogues—can significantly enhance mental health outcomes, reduce stigma, and improve overall community well-being. Intergenerational platforms can foster open discussions about mental health, facilitating acceptance and reducing isolation among individuals seeking help (European Economic and Social Committee, 2023).

Promoting Long-term Resilience

An intergenerational approach not only addresses immediate crises but also fosters long-term resilience within communities. By designing policies and programs that incorporate the perspectives and experiences of both younger and older generations, municipalities can facilitate comprehensive problem-solving, ensuring that interventions are sustainable and reflective of the community's needs. This holistic perspective aids in the identification of effective strategies that are more likely to gain community buy-in and participation, enhancing their overall efficacy (European Commission, 2024).

Cooperation between municipalities and community centers to improve regional economic and social capital

Municipalities, local communities and community centers can collaborate effectively to enhance both economic and social capital within a region. This partnership can create a multifaceted approach to community development that leverages the strengths of both entities. By fostering social capital, municipalities can improve community engagement, trust, and cooperation, which are essential for sustainable economic growth.

One of the primary ways municipalities can work with community centers is by creating programs that encourage social interaction among residents. Social capital, defined as the networks of relationships among people in a community, plays a crucial role in economic development (Dillahunt, 2014). By organizing events that bring together diverse groups, municipalities can help build weak ties among residents, which are essential for fostering trust and collaboration across socioeconomic divides (Dillahunt,

2014). These events can include community fairs, workshops, and cultural festivals that not only promote local businesses but also enhance community cohesion.

Moreover, municipalities can support community centers in providing resources and training that enhance human capital. For instance, vocational training programs can be established to equip residents with skills that are in demand in the local job market. Research indicates that social capital interacts with economic hardships, influencing overall community health and well-being (Gu et al., 2021). By investing in human capital through training and education, municipalities can help residents improve their employability, thereby increasing their economic capital and contributing to the overall economic growth of the region ("Social Capital for Young Indonesian Entrepreneurs' Development", 2023).

Additionally, municipalities can facilitate access to funding and grants for community centers, enabling them to expand their services and reach more residents. This financial support can be critical in economically distressed areas where community centers often struggle to maintain operations (Dillahunt, 2014). By providing financial resources, municipalities not only enhance the capacity of community centers but also demonstrate a commitment to fostering social capital. This can lead to increased trust in local government, as residents see tangible benefits from their tax contributions (Muringani et al., 2021).

Another important aspect of this collaboration is the establishment of partnerships with local businesses. Municipalities can work with community centers to create initiatives that promote local entrepreneurship and support small businesses. For example, community centers can host business incubators or mentorship programs that connect aspiring entrepreneurs with established business owners. This not only fosters economic growth but also strengthens social ties within the community, as residents collaborate and support one another in their business endeavors (Engbers & Rubin, 2018).

Furthermore, municipalities can utilize community centers as platforms for civic engagement and participation. By encouraging residents to take part in local governance and decision-making processes, municipalities can enhance social capital and empower communities (Engbers et al., 2016). Community centers can host town hall meetings, workshops, and forums where residents can voice their concerns and contribute to local policy discussions. This participatory approach not only builds trust between residents and local government but also ensures that community needs are adequately addressed (Aldrich & Meyer, 2014).

In addition to fostering economic growth, the collaboration between municipalities and community centers can also address social issues such as health disparities and food insecurity. By working together, they can implement programs that provide access to healthy food options, health screenings, and wellness education. Research has shown that social capital can significantly impact health outcomes, particularly in economically disadvantaged communities (Gu et al., 2021). By addressing these social

determinants of health, municipalities can improve the overall well-being of their residents while simultaneously enhancing social capital through community engagement (Vikram, 2018).

Moreover, municipalities can support community centers in developing programs that promote environmental sustainability. Initiatives such as community gardens, recycling programs, and green spaces can enhance both social and economic capital by fostering community pride and encouraging local participation in environmental stewardship (Bathuure, 2021). These programs not only improve the physical environment but also create opportunities for residents to connect and collaborate, further strengthening social ties within the community.

The integration of technology into community programs can also enhance the collaboration between municipalities and community centers. By leveraging digital platforms, municipalities can facilitate communication and engagement among residents, making it easier for them to access resources and participate in community activities. For instance, municipalities can develop mobile applications that provide information about local events, services, and resources available at community centers (Jen et al., 2014). This technological integration can help bridge gaps in access to information, particularly for marginalized populations, thereby enhancing social capital and community cohesion.

Furthermore, municipalities can play a crucial role in advocating for policies that support social capital development. By prioritizing social capital in local economic development strategies, municipalities can create an environment that encourages collaboration, trust, and community engagement (Engbers & Rubin, 2018). This can include policies that promote affordable housing, access to education, and support for local businesses, all of which contribute to the overall economic and social health of the community (Dinda, 2014).

In conclusion, the collaboration between municipalities and community centers is essential for improving economic and social capital in a region. By fostering social interaction, investing in human capital, providing financial support, and promoting civic engagement, municipalities can enhance community resilience and well-being. This partnership not only addresses immediate economic needs but also builds a foundation for sustainable growth and social cohesion in the long term.

History and current states of Mother Centers and Networks in the Danube region

The History of Mother Centers in Bosnia and Herzegovina

Written by **Nada Crljic** www.majke.ba

History of network

The Mother Centers in Bosnia and Herzegovina has its origins in the early 2000s, building on the legacy of support to women in post-conflict Bosnia and Herzegovina. This idea emerged as part of a broader response to the particular struggles faced by women, especially mothers, in the aftermath of the Bosnian war 1992-1995. The war left many women in challenging circumstances, often as single parents or heads of households, with social and legal vulnerabilities. By uniting women from different ethnic backgrounds, the center has played a role in peacebuilding and reconciliation, supporting joint efforts to rebuild communities fractured by war. The first mother center in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Mother center „Plamen“ (<https://www.facebook.com/centarzamajke.plamen>) was established at 2001 in Zavidovici with

the support of mother centers from Germany. Mother center was established with the aim to support and empower women and mothers in B&H in ongoing social recovery and social healing. Soon, mother center became vital space for mutual support, empowerment, and advocacy for women's rights and family welfare in post-war recovery. In 2003 Mother center „Plamen“ initiate establishment of three Roma mother centers in Vitez, Zenica and Kakanj. But, due to lack of governmental support and lack of resources only one center stayed active until today (Roma mother center „Nada“ Kakanj). Mother center „Plamen“ continue with its good work, getting stronger as organisation and starting to support grassroots women and women led initiatives in marginalised communities, such as rural communities and Roma communities. Only this year (2025), through project „Mothers for peace and ecology“ , implementing by MINE, „MC“Plamen“ initiated establishment of Mother centers network in Bosnia and Herzegovina (www.majke.ba). **The Network of Mother Centers in Bosnia and Herzegovina represents an organized, grassroots movement to respond to women's and mothers' needs addressing social, legal, and psychological support—and advocating for equality and care in society.**

Difficulties and achievements

Social, economic, and cultural challenges that women encounter in B&H impact the center's work to support mothers effectively. There is no systematic governmental support to mother centers. Network of Mother centers in B&H face several key challenges in establishing and maintaining the network:

- **Limited resources and funding:** Many mother centers operate with constrained financial and material resources, which limits their capacity to organize, expand, and sustain network activities.
- **Bureaucratic and systemic hurdles:** Complex and fragmented healthcare and social systems create difficulties in coordination, policy implementation, and gaining institutional support for mother center networks.
- **Social and cultural barriers:** Stigma, traditional gender roles, and societal disrespect toward mothers and women's initiatives sometimes hinder participation and support for network development.
- **Fragmentation and isolation:** Especially in post-conflict or economically disadvantaged areas, mother centers can struggle with geographic and social isolation, impeding the creation of cohesive, cooperative networks.
- **Lack of formalized structure and training:** Establishing formal networks requires organizational skills, leadership, and conflict resolution training, which mother centers may initially lack.
- **Balancing diverse needs and sustaining volunteer motivation:** Centers often depend on volunteer work, which may be affected by competing family and economic responsibilities, leading to challenges in maintaining active participation.
- **Emerging social challenges:** Expanding network activities to include new groups (e.g., refugee mothers) and addressing trauma-sensitive needs require additional capacities that may stretch limited resources.

The establishment of the Mother Centers network in Bosnia and Herzegovina is currently being realized through the project "Mothers for Peace and Ecology," supported by the International Network of Mother Centers (MINE). This involves collaboration with ten mother centers in Bosnia and Herzegovina, led by the original Mother Center "Plamen" which has been active for 24 years.

Network of mother centers in B&h currently consist of 10 mother centers:

1. Mother center „Plamen“, Zavidovici
2. Mother center „Krivaja-Iskra“, Krivaja
3. Mother center „Kovci“, Kovaci
4. Mother center „Gostovic“, Gostovic
5. Mother center „Majska ruza“, Mecevici
6. Mother center „Zejneb“, Zavidovici
7. Mother center „Sabina Jamakovic“, Olovo
8. Roma Mother center „Nada“ Kakanj
9. Roma Mother center „Bolje sutra“, Visoko
10. Roma Mother center „Izvor zivota“ Vitez

All of the mother centers individually and as Network are working actively on empowerment of women in their communities. They support mothers in becoming

informed and active advocates for themselves and their families, thereby promoting healthier families and communities. On a broader level, Mothers' Centers empower mothers to be catalysts for personal and societal change, enhancing social cohesion and integration at the community level. Network of mother centers in B&H serves as a foundational and active network, overcoming systemic challenges through community empowerment, advocacy, and network building within and beyond Bosnia and Herzegovina, facilitating cooperation and solidarity among women's groups. This network contributes to social inclusion and resilience in post-conflict communities.

Current situation

Network of Mother centers in B&H promote resilience, unity, and social inclusion, supporting vulnerable mothers through education, community activities, and social support. Through international network (MINE) Network of mother centers in B&H connect locally with global best practices, enhancing its impact.

Web page of the Network of mother centers in B&H (www.majke.ba) is set up and process of uploading content is on going. Lines of communication between mother centers, members of the network, are functioning, enabling mother centers to share ideas, concerns, feedback, and information within the network. All members of B&H network of mother centers communicate openly and directly with one another in a collaborative environment.

Recent projects involving network of mother centers in B&H include workshops on peace work in post-war countries and supporting refugee women and mothers, especially from Ukraine, with a trauma-sensitive approach. Through such activities mother centers, members of the network of mother centers in B&H, have opportunity to work in an international setting and to feel sense of belonging to international community of women with whom they share a vision. The network building efforts are supported by local and international partners, focusing on creating formal and informal mother centers that serve as community and social hubs for women and mothers.

Addressed challenges (see under chapter „Difficulties and achievements) are partly addressed through international partnerships, capacity-building workshops, mentorship programs, and connecting with global mother center networks, but ongoing efforts are needed to overcome systemic and social obstacles to strengthen and expand mother center networks effectively

Where are we heading as country and national network of MCs

The overarching goals for the network are to promote networking at both the national and international levels, support the sustainability of mother centers and women's initiatives within Bosnia and Herzegovina, facilitate the creation of new centers, expand the existing network, improve access to resources and information for members and on that way support community development

Thus, the overall national strategy for the MC network is:

- **Expansion to new locations** to increase geographical coverage and outreach.
- **Strengthening cooperation** with international organizations and national ministries.
- **Promoting the role of women as community change agents** and addressing social cohesion and trust in communities.

This trajectory suggests an integrated, community-centered approach that is based on empowerment and social inclusion as key pillars of the network's future

Conclusion

Women involved in the mother centers play a crucial role in community change by combating gender-based prejudices and patriarchal values, organizing themselves into women-led groups, and providing safe spaces that support personal development and a culture of peace.

Mother centers in Bosnia and Herzegovina are part of a global grassroots network empowering women by fostering income generation, community support, and advocacy for social inclusion. Despite daunting systemic and social challenges, mother centers in Bosnia have made significant strides in advocating for women's rights, supporting vulnerable mothers, translating global standards into local policy, and building grassroots empowerment networks that strengthen social cohesion. These achievements lay foundational work for ongoing improvements in rights of the women in the country.

The Network of mother centers in Bosnia and Herzegovina is actively growing. It is characterized by cooperative projects led by „Plamen“ and involving multiple centers, training, mentorship, and incorporation of international best practices.

The History of Mother Centers in Germany, Bavaria

Written by Susanne Veit Bavaria

History of our network

The history of mothers' centres in Germany begins in Bavaria, among other places. One of the three nationwide model projects started in Munich in the early 1980s – funded by the Federal Ministry for Family Affairs. The success was clear: the concept quickly spread throughout Germany, but especially in Bavaria. Munich took on a pioneering role and recognized the social value of the mothers' centers early on. Although these are voluntary municipal services, the services have been further expanded and firmly integrated into the municipal infrastructure of the city of Munich.

In 1998, the World Conference of Mothers' Centres took place in Unterschleissheim near Munich. Bavarian women also took part in the World Women's Conference in

Beijing – early proof of the movement's international commitment and global perspective.

At the same time, the centers in Munich began to network with each other. Joint campaigns such as the Federal Association's campaign "Kinder kriegen kosten" (Children have costs), supported in Munich by prominent personalities such as the actress Jutta Speidel, showed the power of collective public relations work. For a long time, this work was organized on a voluntary basis and without structural funding. And however, it did not result in continuous cooperation from this.

At the end of the 1990s, the idea of Bavaria-wide coordination was born. In 2001, the State Association of Mothers and Family Centres in Bavaria was finally founded. The first few years were run exclusively by volunteers – with a small office that was actually a storage room, great commitment and the goal of making the work visible and receiving funding.

In 2003, institutional funding by the Bavarian Ministry of Social Affairs began. Since then, the state association has continued to develop, supporting start-ups, advising and caring for over 120 mother and family centres – making Bavaria the largest of three state associations in Germany.

Successes and challenges

Our successes

- Recognition in politics and municipalities: The centres are firmly anchored in many cities and municipalities and have been structurally supported by Bavarian state funding since 1992. In 2024, around 80 institutions were funded by the state programme. In Munich alone, there are 34 funded family centers (as of 2025).
- Integration as lived practice: Integration is not a project, but a lived reality. The centres are open to everyone – regardless of origin, religion or residence status. They are safe places where togetherness, diversity and trust grow.
- Learning democracy in everyday life: The centres offer low-threshold opportunities for participation, helping to shape the living environment and developing democratic skills – through discussion groups, volunteering and co-determination.
- Diversity of commitment: Many women with migration experience not only become visitors, but also volunteer or work full-time. This creates real participation and promotes social cohesion.
- Enabling social justice: Open meetings are generally free of charge, offers cost little – so that they are accessible to all families.

Our challenges

- Chronic underfunding: Most centers operate with very limited resources. The amount of funding is stagnating, while rents and operating costs – especially in

the cities – are rising. In the long run, this endangers the existence of individual locations.

- Mothers and family centres need full-time staff to ensure reliability and continuity and professionalism.
- Less voluntary commitment: Many associations are struggling with a declining willingness to volunteer – especially in responsible roles such as on the board or in regular offers.
- Social change: Visitors expect more services and increasingly see the centre as a service facility. The original idea – "We are all the centre" – is somewhat pushed into the background and needs to be emphasised more again.
- Generational change: Many women of the boomer generation who have been in the maternity and family centres for many years are retiring. The transition to younger committed people takes time, good support and appreciation. And it is important that what makes us special is preserved and that our unique selling point is preserved.
- Changed realities of mothers' lives: More and more women are returning to work early – for financial reasons or because they want to live a self-determined life. This shortens the time spent in the center and reduces the potential for engagement. This development is right and important – but it poses new tasks for the centres.
- Tensions between full-time and volunteer work: Who gets money – and why? This question is sensitive. The balance between professional structures and lived solidarity must be constantly rebalanced.

Current situation

Family policy framework in Bavaria (as of 2024)

- Births: 114,365 babies were born in Bavaria – a decrease of 1.8% compared to 2023.
- Fertility rate: 1.39 children per woman – lowest level in over a decade. In Munich, it is only 1.22.
- Employment of mothers: 67% of mothers with children under the age of three are employed – 80% of them part-time.
- Funded mothers' centres: Around 80 facilities in the state funding programme, 27 of them in Munich.
- Trends: More and more single parents, more diverse family forms, rising social inequality, growing need for low-threshold support and encounters.

Where we want to go – strategy & vision

Our central goal in times of austerity policy: No center must be lost. We are committed to the preservation and expansion of the mother and family centres throughout Bavaria - also in rural areas.

We see ourselves as places of lived democracy. With us, people can learn – without any hurdles – to raise their voices, to help shape their environment, to take responsibility.

We demand and promote real equality – 50:50 is not an ideal, but a necessity. Mothers should be given the courage and opportunities to bring their interests into political processes.

We are convinced that every society needs caring communities. Mothers and family centres are such places. This is where children are made strong, communities care issues are thought of in solidarity, educational inequality is combated and new ways of social participation are opened.

We strengthen international cooperation – for example through our support of the MINE (Mothers' Centres International Network for Empowerment). After all, social change is global – and learning from each other means growing together.

We open our doors to all generations, all life situations, all perspectives. Not only as a meeting place for parents, but as a social anchor for entire neighborhoods.

We are convinced that if you want to make the world a social and just place, you have to start with families. And they need places like our centres.

The History of Mother Centers in Germany, Baden Württemberg

Written by Jasmin Horber

History of our network

The founding phase

In 1985, there were already several Mother Centers throughout Germany, and the Federal Association of Mother Centers was founded. A year later, in 1986, the first MCs were established in Baden-Württemberg. In the following years, several MCs were founded each year in Baden-Württemberg. The centers generally chose the legal form of a registered, non-profit association with volunteer board members. This legal form is very common in Germany, especially in southern Germany, and offers tax and financial advantages.

In 1990, there was an initial initiative to establish a network in Baden-Württemberg, and in 1992 the “Mütterforum Baden-Württemberg e.V.” (Mothers' Forum Baden-Württemberg registered association) was founded. The association had to be founded in order to receive funding from the state. After some difficulties, the women succeeded in obtaining institutional funding from 1993 onwards for the establishment of an office and a small project grant for the centers. This small contribution from the state to the local centers was above all an expression of the recognition of the MCs by

the state and thus also a prerequisite for the centers to receive funding from their local authorities at all.

Expansion of the network

The recognition by the state and the new network meant that in the following years many of today's MCs located in Baden-Württemberg were founded: Today, the Mütterforum has 50 member centers, 41 of which were founded before 2000. The names of the centers vary, but all of them were founded on the basis of self-help. In 2007, the Mothers' Forum therefore added the suffix "Association of Independent Mother Centers, Family Centers, and Multi-Generational Houses" to distinguish itself from the centers run by large organizations. According to the statutes, only Mother Centers and other family-related organizations associated with the idea of self-help can be active members. The 2000s were marked by several major political campaigns as well as joint international projects and learning partnerships with the international umbrella organization mine.

Partnerships at the state level

The Mütterforum joined the Baden-Württemberg State Women's Council already in 1992 in order to gain more political influence. Since 2009, the Mütterforum has been working with the State Family Council and in 2012 became a founding member of the Family Education Network in Baden-Württemberg. In 2019, the framework concept "Family Education in Baden-Württemberg" was published – written by the Family Education Network in collaboration with the Mütterforum.

In 2015, the Mütterforum became a member of the Paritätischer Landesverband Baden-Württemberg (Parity State Association of Baden-Württemberg), which is very important for the political lobbying as well as the professional and financial support of the Mothers' Forum.

Difficulties and achievements

Securing informal family education

In 2009/2010, the "Babycafé mit Gästen" (Babycafé with guests) format, which is very important for the Mütterforum, was developed to open up a space for young parents with children in their first year of life. It is designed as an open meeting place with a focus on relationship and networking and was developed as counterpoint to formal learning and courses. The background to this was family policy in Germany and the change that young mothers were increasingly returning to work after just one year of parental leave instead of three. Children were increasingly being cared for in institutions from the age of 1 – a novelty for West Germany.

At the state level, the Baden-Württemberg program STÄRKE (STRENGTH) for the promotion of parental skills provided the political and financial impetus for the implementation of the Babycafé in the centers. The Mütterforum is a member of the project group "Framework Agreement for the Implementation of the STÄRKE Program" of the state of Baden-Württemberg. Through intensive lobbying, the Babycafé concept was accepted as an informal family education program and is therefore funded. For

most centers today, this is the main financial pillar for the open meetings, including the Babycafé.

Another novelty in family education in the state was that the Babycafé leaders did not have to be trained educators, but rather that the concept works with everyday experts who are qualified by the Mütterforum.

Further development and quality assurance of the open meeting

With the reflection tool “I am Clara.” a project team from the Mütterforum has, since 2018, brought together the knowledge and experience of the open meeting, which had previously been passed on mainly verbally, in a tool for family self-help groups. The reflection tool offers tools and food for thought to further develop the design of the open meetings through conscious decisions and targeted actions.

If necessary, a team of Clara trainers from the Mütterforum provides support with ideas and workshops on site. The reflection tool is not only reserved for MCs, but is open to all interested institutions. An educational partnership with the Quartiersakademie Baden-Württemberg (district academy) enables funding for workshops.

Social challenges for families and volunteers

These correspond to the points mentioned by the Bavarian state association.

Financial challenges for the network and the centers

Since 1993, funding has been provided by the Ministry of Social Affairs (see above, current name: Ministry of Social Affairs, Health and Integration of Baden-Württemberg). However, this funding was far from meeting the expectations and demands of the MCs from the outset. It has only been increased slightly and, despite intensive efforts, has not been adjusted at all since 2013.

The Mütterforum is therefore dependent on project funds, which are very costly to obtain and tie up a lot of resources. The level of support for MCs by the respective municipalities varies greatly. Some municipalities do not even contribute to the rent for the premises. Others, on the other hand, provide suitable premises free of charge and in some cases even subsidize staff positions. To date, only Stuttgart has established comprehensive municipal support for Family Centers, including MCs. Five of our member centers are located in Stuttgart.

Current situation

Our current 50 member centers are open to all generations in the neighborhood and are inclusive and lively places in the social space. The landscape of MCs in Baden-Württemberg is very heterogeneous due to the very low level of funding provided to the individual centers by the state. In addition to small, volunteer-run centers, mostly in rural areas, there are family centers with a mix of full-time and volunteer staff in larger municipalities. Some centers have developed into intercultural and intergenerational centers that are supported by the federal government and have significant financial and human resources at their disposal. The majority of those active in the centers were and

are volunteers. Our network comprises around 1,500 volunteers in centers in Baden-Württemberg.

The centers are characterized by a wide variety of services: open meetings for families, courses, lectures for parents, creative activities for adults and children, counseling, self-help groups, childcare, second-hand shops, lunch clubs, and much more.

A study by FamilienForschung Baden-Württemberg (family research institute) from 2022 shows the importance of Mother and Family Centers for families and neighborhoods: “Mother and Family centers help families both in acute need of support and preventively. They also make an important contribution to neighborhood development, the promotion of democracy, and social cohesion.”

Local authorities are under considerable financial pressure. In 2026, this already led to specific cuts in institutional funding for MCs.

Where our regional network is heading to

Our main task is to stabilize and strengthen existing centers in the difficult financial situation of local authorities and with stagnating or even declining funding. We support new initiatives in setting up a center. We want to continue to be a strong voice in the state for families, mothers, and equality in care work. To this end, we will continue to maintain and expand our excellent partnerships at the state level, because joint lobbying in a large alliance gives us more clout in politics in the social sector and on family issues.

The Mütterforum is actively involved at the state level in the development and implementation of the Ministry of Social Affairs' family support strategy. We have high hopes for this. Together with our partner associations, we are calling for, among other things, reliable financial support for family education facilities such as MCs.

We promote democracy education in the everyday lives of families – with open meetings and other offerings in the centers.

At the network level, our goal is to promote (political) engagement from the centers to the state level. To further develop our network, we want to involve the voices of the younger generation even more consistently and accompany generational change in the centers.

The History of Mother Centers in Hungary

Written by **Kinga Milankovics, Emese Dömsödi, Rita Kardos**
Hungarian Mother Center Network (www.hmcn.hu)

Overview

Mother Centers (MCs) in Hungary have a history spanning over two decades, though their journey has been fraught with challenges. Despite the dedication of women striving to create community spaces, persistent resource shortages and societal stereotypes about women's initiatives have significantly impacted the network's growth and sustainability. Individual MCs primarily focus on their local communities, but a lack of resources has hindered their ability to unite under a national umbrella. Furthermore, since 2006, the network's activity levels have been dictated by the availability or absence of coordination capacity.

The Early Years: Establishing a Network (2002–2010)

The first MC with explicit networking objectives was founded in 2002 in Gödöllő, Hungary, under the name Regina Foundation. Establishing a physical space and launching operations took several years, culminating in the creation of REGINA MC and Women's House (www.reginagodollo.wordpress.com). While the center provided activities centered on motherhood, it also introduced programs for labor market reintegration and entrepreneurial development. Additionally, the MC in Gödöllő featured a permaculture garden, which served as both a community space and an educational resource for sustainable agriculture practices.

By 2006, REGINA MC took the initiative to organize a broader network by financially supporting six other MCs across Hungary through a mini-project call. This effort led to the formation of the Regina Mother Center Network (<https://anyakozpontok.blogspot.com/>), which also extended support to rural initiatives seeking to establish MCs. One notable example was the Holdam Association in Miskolc, which established Holdam MC in 2006. Holdam MC was the first successful example of cooperation between a municipality and an MC—the municipality provided the building, while the MC undertook the renovation and program implementation. Holdam later assumed coordination responsibilities for the network around 2010, securing project funding and dedicating significant efforts to sustaining the network.

Expansion and Challenges (2010–2017)

Following Holdam's tenure, Emese Dömsödi took over the coordination of the MC Network while also leading efforts to organize a local MC in Kalocsa. However, during this period, political shifts in Hungary had a direct impact on funding for community initiatives. The Orbán government, which came into power, implemented funding cuts

that severely affected women-led and community-driven projects. As a result, the MC Network became largely dormant around 2017, though some individual MCs continued their operations in specific locations across the country.

One success story of Anyahajó Mother center in Budapest: The József Attila Lakótelep Mother Center began organizing in late 2013, when local mothers started expressing new needs for different kinds of community gatherings and engagement. Initially launched by a small group of enthusiastic women, the initiative quickly gained momentum through informal meetings, surveys, and community discussions. A key turning point came with a successful grant from the Norwegian Civil Fund, which allowed the group to formalize their goals and establish the Anyahajó Mother Center. By the end of the 14-month project, they had built a strong volunteer base, launched a variety of community services, formed an association, and gained a public presence online and in the media.

In 2018, the center secured its own dedicated space at 1098 Budapest, Toronyház utca 3/b, becoming a true second living room for local mothers. Over 80% of its programs are public, and most are free or donation-based. Run by passionate volunteers and visiting professionals, the center has built a solid network of partnerships. Despite challenges such as the COVID pandemic, the community has remained active and resilient. By 2024, the fourth and fifth generation of mothers had taken the lead, winning awards and continuing to expand the center's impact through active outreach and ongoing grant success.

Revival and New Directions (2022–Present)

By 2022, a renewed willingness among Hungarian municipalities to engage with local care challenges—particularly in the areas of elderly care and childcare—began to emerge. This shift was likely influenced by the social and psychological impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, which exposed significant vulnerabilities in local support systems. In response, two major developments took place: the establishment of the **Conscious Ageing Network** ([Tudatos Öregedés Hálózat](#)) and the revitalization of the **Hungarian Mother Center Network (HMCN)** (hmcn.hu). Unlike previous phases, this new momentum has brought together women-led grassroots initiatives and municipal stakeholders, fostering a more collaborative and integrated approach to community-based care and resilience.

In 2024, a new wave of interest emerged in connecting national efforts to the broader European context. This led to the reinvigoration of cooperation between HMCN and the **Mother Centers International Network for Empowerment (MINE)**. This strategic alignment has opened new pathways for knowledge exchange, capacity-building, and transnational project development, strengthening the sustainability and visibility of the movement both within Hungary and across Europe.

The same year saw the successful establishment of two new Mother Centers in **Jánoshida** and **Hajdúszoboszló**, exemplifying a revitalized model of municipal–community cooperation. In both cases, local women’s groups and municipalities co-designed and co-managed the centers, showcasing a shift toward shared responsibility and trust. These initiatives reflect a broader movement toward the concept of "**Caring Communities**", which emphasizes intergenerational solidarity, holistic well-being, and community-rooted solutions to structural social challenges.

Another significant milestone is Hungary’s involvement in another **Danube Region Interreg project titled “Caring Communities”**, in which the Conscious Ageing Network participates as a one of the key stakeholders. This project represents an important and timely convergence of grassroots and institutional interests, offering a formal framework for municipalities and local initiatives to collaborate under the umbrella of the **Hungarian National Association of Municipalities**. This development has unlocked new opportunities for joint action, strategic alignment, and policy innovation at the national and regional levels.

In 2025, the Hungarian Mother Center Network conducted an **online survey** to map and reconnect with grassroots women’s initiatives across the country. The survey also served as a first step in building a broader alliance, reaching out to women’s organizations interested in participating in the revitalized network. As of now, this **reconnection and network-building process remains ongoing**, laying the groundwork for a stronger, more inclusive ecosystem of Caring Communities in Hungary.

The following section lists the initiatives and organizations that have responded to the survey or expressed interest in joining the revitalized network.

Name of the Community	Location	Website	Founded
HajráAnyu Association MC	Hajdúszoboszló	https://www.hajraanyu.hu	2019
Regina Foundation Janoshida MC	Jánoshida	https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=61565404756883	1999
Lollipop	Dunakeszi	https://kozossegitel.hu/	2015
„You are not alone!” – single mothers self-support group	online with IRL meetings in Budapest	https://www.facebook.com/groups/nemvagyegyedul	2024
Chloro’Feel art meetup green collective	Rezi	https://www.facebook.com/ChloroFeelmeetup/	2024

Vindornyalak Municipality: Hertelendy Community Space	Vindornyalak	https://vindornyalak.hu/	NA
„Poverty is not a shame” group	Online community	https://www.facebook.com/groups/2372806476106542	2018
Regina House	Gödöllő	www.reginanet.hu , www.regina.garden	2005
HerStory Collective	Budapest	www.herstory.hu (academic thinktankÖ)	2020
Hungarian Women’s Lobby	Budapest	www.noierdek.hu	2003

Conclusion

The history of Mother Centers in Hungary reflects a powerful narrative of both resilience and struggle. Despite persistent resource shortages, limited institutional support, and shifting political landscapes, dedicated grassroots actors—primarily women—have continued to sustain and nurture these spaces as vital hubs for community care, empowerment, and solidarity.

While the past two decades have seen waves of enthusiasm followed by periods of dormancy, recent developments signal a renewed and potentially transformative momentum. The revival of the Hungarian Mother Center Network (HMCN), the establishment of new centers in partnership with municipalities, and the growing alignment with European initiatives such as the MINE network and Interreg’s *Caring Communities* project all point to a promising trajectory.

What sets the current phase apart is the emerging model of **strategic cooperation** between municipalities and community-led initiatives. This model moves beyond ad-hoc support or isolated funding rounds; it envisions a co-creative partnership in which municipalities recognize the unique value of Mother Centers as local engines of care, inclusion, and resilience. Equally important is the widening focus on **intergenerational care and community-based responses to systemic crises**—from demographic decline to ecological stress.

Hungary’s participation in regional and EU-level frameworks offers further opportunities for sustainability, innovation, and policy influence. By anchoring MCs within broader social and regional development strategies, and by institutionalizing their role within municipal care ecosystems, Hungary has the potential to become a model for integrated, community-driven social infrastructure in the Danube Region.

In sum, while challenges remain, the foundations are now in place for Mother Centers in Hungary to evolve from fragile grassroots projects into recognized and resourced pillars of a caring, democratic, and inclusive society.

The History of Mother Centers in Serbia

Written by **Danijela Lakatos**, Mother center „Aurora” www.centaraurora.org

MOTHER CENTER "AURORA" BELGRADE

Mother center „Aurora" was founded in Belgrade in 2016. The mission of the Mother center is to provide continuous professional support to parents with children, especially mothers, in the performance of parental roles, to help build responsible parenthood and appropriate competencies for quality development support, as well as to ensure the continuity of the child's development and learning in cooperation with schools and the environment. The target group of users of center are mothers, babies, children of preschool and school age, young people, parents / guardians, elder people. According to the last census there are 27.325 Roma in Belgrade those who declared themselves to be Roma, i.e. those whom the enumerator asked about their nationality.

The founder of this center is a Roma woman who returned from asylum in Germany. During her stay in Stuttgart, she volunteered at a nearby center for mothers, which was a new experience for her, which turned into her vision for opening a center for mothers in Serbia. There were many reasons for establishing such a center in Serbia, the most important being the difficult position of the Roma community, and especially the difficult position of Roma women.

A regional survey on the situation of Roma in the Western Balkans conducted in 2017 showed that marginalized Roma still face limited access to opportunities in all aspects of human development, from basic rights to health, education, housing, employment and living standards. As stated in this research, in the Republic of Serbia there is a big gap between Roma men and women and their non-Roma neighbors, especially among young people. Roma men and women aged 18-24 are almost half as likely to be involved in employment, education or training (27%), compared to 58% of non-Roma youth. This has lifelong implications, as it blocks further opportunities for decent employment. Romani men and women aged 15-64 are almost half as likely to be employed as compared to their non-Roma neighbors. During 2017, speaking of education, only 17% of Roma children aged 3-6 were enrolled in preschool or school institutions; the vast majority of Roma children did not attend school. Supplementary research by UNDP shows that the position of Roma women in the Western Balkans is particularly difficult. On average, nine out of ten young Roma women are not in the

employment, education or training system, two out of three Roma women do not have their own money, while one out of two employed Roma women does not have health or pension insurance. There is an occurrence of early marriages among Romani women, which is second in the Western Balkans region, after the Republic of Albania. Forty percent of Roma women aged 20-49 in the Republic of Serbia mention getting married before the age of 18, compared to 9% of non-Roma women from the neighborhood, which means that on average one out of three Roma women got married before the age of 18.

At the very beginning, there were many challenges, there was no space in which activities could be carried out, and the need for support grew more and more. The founders of the center had the idea that all activities should be carried out within a community made up of Roma women, and that the space for the duration of the psycho-social workshop, as well as the first activity, would be their house, some of the participants and each subsequent workshop would take place at another participant's house. The topics covered were actually community problems, such as: alcoholism in the family, how to recognize violence and how to protect yourself, mental support, early marriages, etc. This type of work was challenging for everyone, the partners of the participants in whose house the workshops were held had to leave for the duration of them, which often caused their displeasure.

The center received its first space in 2017 with the immense support of Andrea Laux, and the Mother center „Aurora” was also officially opened that year. With the first space of the center came new activities, the possibility for more activities with women and activities with children. At one of the workshops, which aimed to educate on the importance of preventive women's examination, extremely worrying information was obtained, namely that some women had not visited a gynecologist for 10, 12, and some even 30 years, which caused concern for the founder of the Aurora Center. With an urgent reaction in cooperation with the City municipality Vozdovac and the local health center, mother center managed to organize a female examination for all the women of the community and actively continued with education about the importance of regular preventive visits to the doctor.

Due to the needs of the community and its cooperation, the center leased premises in the territory of the Zvezda municipality, 24 square meters in the basement, and in it managed to realize some of the first courses, such as a sewing course and a cooking course. The sewing course was attended by more than 9 women and trained for independent work in smaller schneider works. „Aurora” mother center continued workshops with women and the community saw the importance of the Center. By noting problems in employment due to lack of qualifications, the Aurora Center makes its contribution to the community through the Zvezdara municipality project. Also, mother center beneficiaries are becoming more competitive on the labor market. Thus,

18 women completed the manicure course, 8 women completed the massage course and continued to spread their knowledge in the Center, so that the now trained women educated other interested women and transferred all the knowledge to them. We single out one young girl who did not finish high school, but with Aurora's help, she managed to complete a manicure course, get professional equipment and start her work, which later turned into her main source of income, and she opened a manicure salon on the outskirts of Belgrade.

The importance of workshops that are implemented for the purpose of educating women is best reflected through numerous examples. Just one example is the case that started at the workshop „How to properly feed a baby“, where a young mother in a difficult financial situation stated that she feeds her newborn baby a few weeks old with milk and biscuits, which could have fatal consequences for the baby in that period of life. He responded urgently to the Aurora Center, collected money and the baby was provided with adequate and healthy food, which cannot harm her health, and the mother continued her education at the workshops. The mentioned example clearly shows the role of aurora in the community, it is there for the community and the community is there for it.

As mother center activities expanded and the space was small, the founders managed to find larger rooms of 48 square meters, which made it easier for them to carry out the activities, but again not in a sufficient way that they could carry them out unhindered.

One of the special activities is the development of the first ECO line, which is based on handbags made of ecological materials. Together with the expert team, ECO products were created, which are sewn by the users. The selling price of the Eco bag is 3 euros, of which 1 euro goes to the woman who sewed, 1 euro to the Center and 1 euro to purchase new materials, in this way women create the impression of themselves that they are no longer a burden to their family, but that they also contribute to this society and their family. A particularly proud example are several women who sewed handbags at the Center, but suffered from cancer or some form of disability, and sewing was for them an escape from everyday life and mental relief. As their landlord at the time was returning from abroad in 2024, they were forced to change premises, with all challenges managed to find a space close to the community just a few streets away. Searching for space is always challenging for the Center, because landlords don't want Roma women in their buildings, and this example shows the ubiquity of discrimination against Roma. The Commissioner for the Protection of Equality conducted research and published the publication "Perception of the Roma Community on Discrimination", from which the information below is taken. In 2019, discrimination on the basis of nationality and ethnic origin is not at the top in terms of the frequency of complaints submitted to the Commissioner (6.8% of the total number of complaints on various grounds of discrimination), but the largest number of complaints, 64%, on the basis of nationality

and ethnic origin, as in previous years, was filed due to discrimination against members of the Roma national minority. The results of this research point to the conclusion that in order to achieve full equality and equal opportunities for Roma and Roma women, it is extremely important to approach the problem of poverty and social exclusion in an integral manner, that is, that lasting results can only be achieved through the joint action of all institutions that are directly responsible for the inclusion and realization of equality of the Roma national community.

In the current premises of only 38 square meters and a lot of activities that Aurora has, it is very cramped, but also functional as much as possible. The clear need of the Aurora Center is permanent premises large enough to be able to hold activities with children, with women, various courses and as a novelty that we started, activities with men, because the Aurora Center is guided by the slogan that there is no equality without both sexes.

During the work of the Aurora Center so far, over 140 women, who form an active network, have visited over 160 children, over 20 Roma children have been returned to the regular education system from the system of children with special needs in which they were placed only because it was easier for the teachers to work with Roma children, but with the provision of classes and support when doing homework at the Mother center „Aurora” they manage to return to the regular course of the education system. Over 60 women completed some of the courses with the help of Aurora and became more competitive on the labor market, over 50 Roma children of high school and elementary school age received a scholarship from the Ministry of Education. Research of multiple indicators on the position of women and children in the Republic of Serbia (MICS 6, 2019) shows that:

- 7.4% of Roma children up to the age of 5 attend the Early Childhood Education Program;
- 80% of Roma children attend the preparatory preschool program;

The results of the Aurora Center are significant for the community, they are results that are clearly visible, they change families and lives. The mentioned permanence and sufficient size of the premises would make it possible for women not to gather in smaller groups and for all activities of the Mother Center „Aurora” to be carried out smoothly, but also for the possibility of developing new activities in accordance with the needs of the community.

This center is special because it is the only center for mothers in Serbia. The expansion of centers for mothers is planned in the coming years. It is not yet known what the number of newly established centers for mothers will be, and this will be influenced by the motivation of the local community as well as the support of local institutions and donors.

Mother center „Aurora“ has developed Business plan which purpose is to expand Mothers and children’s daycare center while showcasing the expected operations over the next three to five years. Mother center needs a new space that can be purchased with donor funds or rented. In this business plan is stated that the daycare center will solve the problem of measures and support system for improving position of Roma community by opening up a daycare center that will focus on Roma mothers, single parents, working parents, youth etc. that live or work in the area. Aurora Mothers center could feature a wide range of educational programs, friendly staff, and convenient hours of operation.

Another important aspect of the work of the center for mothers „Aurora" is the cooperation with other non-governmental organizations and networks of non-governmental organizations. The membership in the national Roma network of the Republic of Serbia is highlighted. This network brings together important activists and important non-governmental organizations that deal with gender equality and inclusion of Roma women. In the past period, the network has emphasized the fight against early child marriage. Accordingly, the Center for Mothers has implemented several workshops and initiatives on this topic. Also, the center is in cooperation with with this network, participated in marking the initiative „Month of Roma women's activism", which is realized from March 8th, International women's day, to April 8th, International Roma day. Also, another important collaboration is with the anti-violence network. It consists of women from the majority population and other women from marginalized groups.

Cooperation with institutions at the local and national level is also an important part of the work of the Mother center „Aurora”. In the past period since the establishment of the center, work support has been provided by the city municipality of Zvezdara. As part of this cooperation, various activities and initiatives were implemented with the aim of contributing to the inclusion of the Roma community. Also, other local institutions, such as schools, the Center for social work and the health center, had the opportunity to cooperate with the center. It is important to note that when the city municipality of Zvezdara creates a local document for the social inclusion of Roma in its territory, representatives of the center are always included to give their proposals and suggestions. An important form of cooperation is that in July 2025, the City Municipality of Zvezdara awarded a grant for the financing of the project to the center for mothers „Aurora". This represents a very important step towards strengthening cooperation and democracy with local institutions. On the other hand, cooperation with institutions at the national level is not satisfactory due to frequent changes of government. In the coming period, it is planned to try to establish a new cooperation with them.

The Republic of Serbia should create opportunities for community empowerment at the local level in order to enable communities to act to create social and political changes.

Empowerment and capacity building of communities and authorities must be ensured by building trust and cooperation between stakeholders and the community. This is the only way to achieve full participation of society.

The History of Mother Centers in Slovakia

Written by **Mária Ondráčková**, Director of Wings Forever ngo, MPE Coordinator for UMC Slovakia, **Andrea Dobošová**, Director of Nevedko ngo, member of UMC Slovakia, **Tomáš Gulán**, Coordinator of Naboso Community Space, Martin, Slovakia

Part I: History of Mother Centers in Slovakia

Overview

In 1989, the **Velvet Revolution** peacefully **ended the Communist rule in Czechoslovakia**. Slovakia became an independent state on **January 1, 1993** after the **peaceful dissolution of Czechoslovakia**, sometimes known as the Velvet Divorce. Slovakia's post-1989 history has been marked with serious political conflicts over the course of transformation. Transformation in areas: from autocracy to democracy; from a centrally-planned economy to a market economy; and a redefinition of statehood. With the changes in the economic and social policy of the state after 1989, there are also changes in the structure of the family in Slovakia, which must be understood as a logical and completely natural result of the overall development of society. The end of the 80s and the beginning of the 90s can be considered as a certain milestone in the development of the family and family behavior in Slovakia.

As a basic social “collectivity”, the family continued to fulfill its biological, educational, social and economic function. However, in the light of the new circumstances, it was forced to adapt its behavior more and more to the new political, economic and social situation. Conditions for business have been created, pressure on intensity and responsibility in employment has increased, and unemployment started to rise. The emerging income differences deepened the social differentiation in society, which significantly affected mainly families with children. They had to deal with the loss of former social security as well as a decline in their standard of living.

In 2001, for the first time ever, the number of both complete families and complete families with children decreased. Economic pressure (rising cost of living, inflation, unemployment, housing restrictions) on the one hand, the possibility of entrepreneurship, travel, study, personal realization on the other hand have caused young people to change their attitudes towards starting a family. Demands for the care and upbringing of children are constantly growing. For this reason, children find themselves competing against other goals of the spouses – childlessness or just one child means an increase in the life chances of both spouses (career in employment, standard of living, etc.). Family is moved to the background and other forms of cohabitation become more attractive.

Historical Development

The story of the idea of founding the Mother Centers

Let's start with the words of the founder of the first MC in Slovakia – Eva Fiedlerova: I personally learned about Mother Centers from an article entitled “Another Mother Center in the Czech Republic”, published in the Betynka magazine during my first maternity leave (approximately 1995). I remember the deep impression that the article made on me. It came to my mind again a few years later, when I moved with my husband and son 350 miles from my birthplace, my family, and my friends. My second son was born and I changed my decision to take up three years of maternity leave. I felt isolated, overwhelmed and worried about my future employment. The vision of a Mother Center with a community of women in a similar situation and mood was indeed an ideal solution. The BAMBINO Mother Center was registered in 1998 as a civic association. Eva Fiedlerová was a very important person in this plan together with her friend Danica Hámorová and seven other mothers on maternity leave, they opened the first MC in Slovakia on October 1, 1999.

An inspiring and safe space for children, mutual assistance in childcare, organization of tailor-made programs, education, the opportunity to develop citizenship and own projects (including preparation for business or retraining) were all extremely powerful motivations that quickly became a reality. There is no doubt that at that time, there were certainly many similar initiatives in Slovakia, but rather on an informal basis. In the beginnings of the formal establishment of Bambino, the Fenestra Women's Interest Association from Košice helped the center a lot, with a priority focus on helping women, victims of domestic violence, and the Mother Center was a part of it.

The similar pattern can be found behind all the mothers centres born at that time. A group of women on maternity leave, reading about mother centres, looking for spending their time differently, finding the way how to organize it. The first conference of Mother Centers in Slovakia was organized in MC Bambino Poprad in 2001. Its main idea “Help us to help” was presented with the participation of the Minister of

Labor and Social Affairs, representatives of state administration, local governments, non-governmental organizations and Mother Centers. Mother centers have proven that the world can be moved when people are guided and united by a common agenda and a sincere effort for change. MCs can interpret their protest from below, but also design solutions through campaigns. All the successes of MC so far would not have been possible if it had not been nurtured by the joy of mutual encounters, the effort to understand each other despite some differences, mutual learning and a sense of belonging.

Mother centers are at that time but also nowadays most beautifully expressed by the word “third space”, which is a symbol of the union of different worlds: family or work, academic or lay, private or civic, or worlds of different religions or ethnicities.

Umbrella Organization

The growing number of newly established Mother Centers, the need for effective exchange of information, interconnection and organization in order to be a relevant voice in society resulted in the establishment of the civic association of the Union of Mother Centers in 2003. This was done in Tajov with the participation of all 22 member Mother Centers, in the same year the first General Assembly of the “Union of Mother Centers” was held and received the first grant from the Bernard van Leer Foundation.

Core milestones of UMC

In 2004, the UMC set a Guinness World Record for the number of people pushing a stroller on a 1-mile route. The foundations of the campaign “How we want to raise our children” were laid and the first issue of the Mother Centers magazine was published.

In 2005, the interest in the Union of Mother Centers increased significantly, the number of its members increased to 47 Mother Centers. This year, the event “Drive the stroller, move the world” was organized in the capital Bratislava. The foundations for a new “Enter with a Child” campaign have also been laid.

In 2006, *Conference, Bratislava* the first international conference was organized in Bratislava with the participation of the Mother Centers International Network for Empowerment (MINE) and 170 members from 24 countries – the USA, Switzerland, Hungary, Poland, Ukraine, Uganda, Kenya, Rwanda, Brazil and other. The Mother’s Day event was renamed “A Mile for Mom”.

In 2007, for the first time, UMC organized a public collection “Thank you for being a mother” to support the mother and family centers of Slovakia.

In 2009, a second international conference was organized entitled “Mother Centers as the Academies of Practical Parenting” in Štrbské Pleso with the participation of Mother Centers from Slovakia, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Germany, Poland, Austria, Russia, Italy and Uganda.

In 2012, the first catalog for the “Enter with a Child” campaign was published. The International Day of Mother Centers was organized jointly. UMC received significant institutional support from the Štefan Batory Foundation, became a partner in the international Grundtvig project, and the “Step to Independence” project was launched.

In 2014, UMC became the leader of the International Day of Mother Centers and the mother and family centers of Slovakia were introduced to the world.

UMC and Mother Centres

UMC, as an umbrella organization, has been working for the member mother centers since the beginning. It is a partner in projects whose tasks and goals are fulfilled

precisely through the activities of the member centers. It thus creates opportunities for education and, through projects, also brings some financial stability to the centers.

Since their inception, mother centers in Slovakia have operated without stable systemic support from the state and in the early years they operated mainly on the basis of voluntary work by women - mothers on maternity leave and the support of their families. Maternity centers can quickly respond to the acute needs of society, and it is UMC that can support the centers in these activities in times of crisis, mainly by creating a supportive environment, coordinating, and educating. The times of crises are really good example how mother centres cooperate and leave a great mark in the society . Mother centers often replace the state system, but without systematic assistance, they often encounter burnout among leaders and volunteerism often exceeds healthy limits.

At the Times of Crises

COVID PANDEMIA - The Union of Mother Centers is a platform that brings together mother centers dedicated to all families with small children. At the same time, we ran a counseling center for women at risk of violence in the “Women to women” Advisory Center. The provision of this social service couldn't be interrupted even at those times. Financially we tried to cover the costs through the project grant from Implementing Agency, which suspended payments in February to all organizations that were successful in the call. We ran out of our finances.

However, we had the energy to keep helping. Those times brought new challenges. Statistics on the national hotline had been reduced, but **not the amount of domestic violence**, because those in a weaker position, those living in the same space with the aggressors (by far not only women but also children, elderly and disadvantaged people) **had no access to means of communication**, telephone, e-mail, Facebook. Those people were either not at all, or no longer safe. Mother Centers were closed and women have no one to share their problem with. We were looking for new ways of communicating and supporting those women. At the same time, we were raising awareness among the public (other people from our communities) and encouraged women not be afraid to reach out to our experts and ask for help.

The second big challenge was our project called Learning for Life, which had been running for the second year in a row. Its goal was to support the learning of parents with young children **from socially disadvantaged backgrounds**. These families were even more affected by all the measures currently being imposed by the state. In some municipalities, the “food aid package” was suspended by the Labor Offices. **Educating the hungry is almost impossible**. We mobilized visitors to the centers to help socially disadvantaged families, we sew and distribute masks, and with the help of field workers, we gave out worksheets to parents so that they could get creative with their children. We also helped with collections of necessary goods (most recently for example mobile phones so we could be connected with families). Not to mention that

internet connection was not cheap or unlimited in Slovakia so our vulnerable families had to pay large sums to stay online.

There were problems with **paying rent and energy** to our civic associations (Mother Centers) nationwide. Since they are not proper businesses, they could not claim foregone earnings, but it was up to statutory representatives – usually mothers on parental leave – to pay for these rentals. Similarly, Labor Offices were not able to respond flexibly to the suspension of employment of activation workers (long term unemployed activation scheme) under § 52 of the Labor Code and legal justification is required as to why the suspension took place. Equally similar was the administration with a sheltered workshop. In spite of the current situation, we did not stop doing activities for families who needed us even more in those times. The aim was to maintain good mental health and made available a selection of educational programs. As they wrote to us in mapping our activities – **we were spreading positive mood and maintaining the community, we promote coherence and volunteering.**

The war in UKRAINE

The same wave of solidarity arose at the beginning of the war in Ukraine. MCs automatically opened their doors to families from Ukraine and offered long term, systematic and targeted, not just humanitarian, assistance. Activities in the Slovak mother centers:

- First contact packages = collected by MZ, distributed immediately at the border (sanitary napkins, towel, toothbrush, plasters, vitamin C, baby food, juice, biscuits, glucose, colored pencils, books);
- Relaxation talks, meeting them at eye level, talking about the ways of dealing with stress and war – parenting help;
- Durable food collection, hygiene, clothing in the warehouses;
- Mobile office – printing of Edu documents, documents, scanning, etc.;
- Networking – connecting partners for effectiveness (accommodation, food, school, jobs, health, digital devices and data, connecting with family in Ukraine);
- Health care/system in Slovakia (cancer treatments, broken glasses, vaccination, pregnancy care, support to autistic children, etc.);
- Navigation in the region/area;
- Career advice – job search, solutions for recognition of UA education;
- Targeted help – various forms (strollers for twins, cheaper cellular data – SIM cards at the border, kitchen utensils, wood for heating, medicines, psychologist for adults / children, video
- Calls with parents: many children are here without parents, translation / interpretation);
- Creative and sport activities, crafts and hobbies;
- Slovak language courses – including children’s books and downloadable materials;

- Garden voluntary work – therapy “Helping Hand – help each other”.
- Ukrainian clubs _ natural feeling like home events with food and music

As it is seen, mother centres have become an important part of society. They are not a place of first-rate activism, but their work deserves stable funding from the state system like similar facilities providing services to residents.

Part II: Current State and Challenges of Mother Centers in Slovakia

A. Mother Centers as Community-building and Safe Spaces

Large number of home-bound mothers on maternity leave feel long-term social isolation; especially after omitting their regular full-time job with rich social interactions in exchange for full-time maternal duties and household maintenance. When finding new possibilities for social engagement in local MC, the primary expectations of mothers visiting local MCs for the first time are: 1.) to find peers among mothers; 2.) to find peers and friends for their child; 3.) to find a space of acceptance and new friendships; 4.) to engage in mutual sharing of educational concerns; and 5.) to use the playroom with toys we do not have at their home.

“The playroom” seems to be the primary attraction point. So it seems at first sight both for the mothers and for broader society; yet quite contrary is the case. Mother centers target their attention at working with mothers, rather than only with and for the children; engagement of mothers – both in building new social relationships and in child rearing skills – is its primary mission.

Upon further visits, the mothers find the benefits of MC for their own benefit, and subsequently they engage in activities of MC on regular and frequent basis (regular visitors often spend their time in local MC 3 times per week). Relative to initial expectations, for regular visitors, their MC is a “strong community of visitors, much more than just a playroom.”

B. Learning Spaces, Self-realization and Proactivity

As the MCs are places for self-realization of mothers on maternity leave, they become places of learning. Active volunteers and visiting mothers become a *team* that wishes to learn, both from professionals in area of child rearing and parenting, and by mutual sharing of good practices and experiences. MC wish to be actively engaged in a learning process and create such a space that is both the building/space, as well as the programs, and all participants – active or passive – are constantly in the process of learning and growth. When interviewed, 71% of participants perceive MC as a place for their own initiative, 59% as a place where they gain expert help with parenting, the initial expectation of peer help with parenting tripled and a time for a break from my child doubled. Overall, MCs are perceived as a thriving environment by the active members.

C. Volunteering and Leadership

Mother centers work as a *team*, i.e. not isolated individual leaders only, but in teaming-up with staff, volunteers, visitors, and wishfully with other stakeholders that serve civil society, especially mothers and families.

The drawback of this activism is the perennial state of those who work in non-government sphere and engage in volunteering activities, i.e. of the lack of time and too much burden on the shoulders of the leadership. There always are important things on the agenda: clients visiting and their cases to be dealt with. On one hand the participants perceive their MC as mostly a joint activity of volunteers and all participants. Immediately following, when asked about the role of the leader, it seems that she is responsible for... everything; and the mother center would not manage to operate without all the leadership roles provided by and expected from the sole leader. The same is the case when asked about the role of employees. While in Slovak context the number of full-time employees is very limited, yet their role is – just like of the leader – understood as covering all leadership coordination and management.

Subsequently, when asked about the role of volunteers, their role is seen as providing not the leadership and coordination roles, but the more “mundane” tasks of for example cleanup and help and running everyday errands.

Overall, Slovak MCs feel and fear the concerns about the discrepancy between the over-burden of the leaders and their necessary leadership presence and coordination without which – such is the joint long-term experience – the local MCs would cease to operate. Burnout is the word that was omnipresent. Also, it raises the concern for the failure to delegate these leadership responsibilities by the leader toward the volunteers, and even toward the active participants. As a special concern is the failure to find successors in leadership positions; leading either to too-long-a-term stay in office of the local leader, which is even more discouraging for the newcomers toward picking up their active responsibilities.

D. Municipality Communication

Throughout the two plus decades of being active in Slovak civil realm, Slovak MCs perennially sense the discrepancy between the desired influence and “public voice” in the structures and decision-making process of city magistrate and the reality where the voice of active inhabitants, including leaders and participants of local MCs, is seldom valued, recognized and took into serious notice. Very little has changed throughout the existence on MCs in Slovak context, the activities of local MCs are generally perceived as only a free-time and volunteer activity of young mothers, without any strategic political impact. Mother centers are generally not included in decision-making processes and bodies within the magistrate level; neither are they being systematically included in annual city budgets.

The same is true on the national level, the headquarter of Slovak Mother Centers Union is struggling in finding ways of systematic state support of MCs. While some short-term projects were successful, there still is the lack of both state and civil recognition of the relevance and benefits of MCs for wider society, resulting in low or no systematic

inclusion of MCs in legislation processes toward the rights of mothers and young families and without systematic funding of MCs by the government.

E. Crisis Situations Intervention (Case-study: 2022 Ukraine Refugee Crisis)

Many NGOs in countries neighboring with Ukraine were very active and instrumental in the first wave of UA refugee crisis in 2022. This help was predominantly targeted at humanitarian and material support, i.e. distribution of groceries, hygiene and household necessities. Specific programs were launched, such as language classes, especially in the time when the refugees needed to overcome the first language barrier.

Programs of MCs were in general open and somewhat accommodated toward the needs of the UA refugees; yet only a handful of these refugees actively continues in long-term or active participation of MC activities in 2025. Our observation is that UA refugees are less than other cultures in western Europe used to the concept of active civil participation, therefore they search less for joint communal activities, including MCs. When it comes to the prospects and possibilities to share good practice and gained expertise toward aiding to launch MCs in Ukraine, the willingness of several leaders and MC teams is there, yet the overwhelming workload of daily activities does not allow for more in-depth and full-time focus on this project.

F. Current Challenges of Mother Centers in Slovakia

The key findings from Slovak context for established and future emerging MCs include especially:

Strengths	Weaknesses
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Mother centers are a very welcoming environment, and the participants who find the center a place for their self-initiative and self-growth perceive is as a safe haven and feel very much like at home. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - MCs tend to stay a small community of active and regular participants, rarely outgrowing their micro-local reach. - Mother Centers Union has very limited influence on engagement in national decision-making processes.
Opportunities	Threats
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Visitors of MCs are not from the social group of “young moms” (usual age of participants is 30+). - MCs desire to be a welcoming space for vulnerable groups, including UA refugees, yet they lack the energy and staff to fully focus on the new challenges and new clients with special needs. - MCs wish to spread their ministry beyond the scope they have been 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - There is dire need to reconsider the understanding and distributing of responsibilities of leadership roles beyond the top leader of the center, delegating more competencies toward volunteers and active participants (creating the environment where active participation and taking upon oneself responsibilities is a lived culture of the center).

<p>fulfilling so far; yet more know-how and discussion and international input needs to happen before they are ready to act in a systematic and comprehensive way.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - MCs operate with very limited resources – both financial, personal and space-wise, as the MCs are not in the position of politically influential groups.
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Conclusion: outlook for Mother Centers in Slovakia

The development of Mother Centers in Slovakia illustrates both the strength of grassroots civic engagement and the persistent structural barriers that limit their full potential. Since their emergence in the late 1990s, MCs have proven to be vital “third spaces” for families, providing social support, learning opportunities, and safe environments for women, children, and increasingly for broader community groups. Their role during crises—whether the COVID-19 pandemic or the Ukraine refugee emergency—demonstrated their flexibility, solidarity, and unique ability to mobilize local resources quickly.

At the same time, Slovak MCs continue to face systemic obstacles. They operate with very limited resources, depend heavily on volunteerism, and lack sustained institutional recognition by municipalities or national government. Their contributions are often undervalued as “free-time activities of mothers” rather than acknowledged as strategic partners in community well-being and social infrastructure. This not only risks burnout among leaders but also constrains their capacity to expand services to vulnerable groups or to take on new roles in social innovation.

Looking forward, the sustainability of Slovak MCs depends on stronger partnerships with municipalities, stable funding frameworks, and inclusion in decision-making processes at both local and national levels. By recognizing MCs as essential community-based actors, Slovakia has the opportunity to unlock their full potential as drivers of social cohesion, gender equality, and intergenerational solidarity. Anchoring them more firmly within national policies on family, social care, and community development would ensure that their impact extends beyond the micro-local level, contributing meaningfully to a resilient and caring society.

The History of Mother Centers in the Czech Republic

Written by **Irena Příbylová**, Director of Sítě pro rodinu, z.s., and **Dana Richter**, Regional Coordinator of Sítě pro rodinu, z.s. www.sitprorodinu.cz

History of Sítě pro rodinu and centers in the Czech Republic

The idea of mother centers was brought to Czechoslovakia by Rut Kolínská in the early 1990s. In 1990, the first inspirational event took place—caroling on Three Kings Day. This was followed by an excursion to Munich in 1991, and in 1992, the first mother center was opened in Prague at the YMCA Na Poříčí.

From the early 1990s, the idea began to spread – through seminars, translations of foreign books, methodological support for the founders of the centers, and the creation of lists of emerging locations. Educational and advocacy activities also gradually developed, including negotiations with the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs on the conditions for the operation of the centers and involvement in international cooperation.

The year 2001 marked the formalization of the network with the registration of the civic association "Sítě mateřských center" (Network of Mother Centers). A year later, the inaugural general meeting was held, attended by 69 of the 127 existing centers.

Between 2002 and 2005, the Network operated on a voluntary basis, later gaining the support of the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs and beginning to implement projects from the ESF. Campaigns such as "How to Live with Strollers," "A City for Children," and "Dad's Cool Today" were launched. The Network was also represented on the Government Council for Gender Equality. It gradually established itself as the main umbrella organization for centers in the Czech Republic.

In 2016, it was renamed to Sítě pro rodinu, z.s. (Network for Family, a registered association).

What is Sítě pro rodinu, z.s.?

Sítě pro rodinu is a nationwide umbrella organization that brings together more than 260 maternity, family, and community centers across all 14 regions of the Czech Republic. Its main role is:

- Supporting families in society – promoting family-friendly legislation, networking experts, and involving centers in local government.
- Supporting families in centers – providing methodological assistance, sharing know-how, recognizing good practices, and supporting new and established centers.
- Supporting families in companies – developing the concept of a "family-friendly company," recognizing companies that support parents, and strengthening the value of the family in the labor market.

Today, the network is a key player in family policy and prevention. Over the past 30 years, the centers it oversees have grown from small spaces for moms and kids into community centers for all generations. They offer a safe environment not only for kids and parents, but for all family members.

Current status and challenges of Sít pro rodinu and centers in the Czech Republic

Maternal, family, and community centers (MFC centers) are now an important pillar of primary prevention and pro-family policy. They act as "fire alarms"—detecting problems early on and contributing to the stability of families and communities.

Benefits of the centers:

- they strengthen parenting skills,
- they help prevent social isolation,
- offer support in crisis situations (e.g., COVID-19, refugee crisis),
- they provide space for the development of children and adults,
- they build community life in municipalities and connect different generations.

Volunteering is an important part of the centers' operations and is the basis for their existence. It brings energy, but at the same time reveals limitations—volunteer turnover and the threat of losing continuity. Therefore, gradual professionalization is necessary—centers need stable employees, long-term planning, and multi-source funding.

Main challenges:

- Unstable funding – centers are dependent on short-term grants, often with no guarantee of continuation.
- Lack of operating funds – the most pressing needs are for salaries and energy, which threatens sustainability.
- Low awareness of the role of centers – the public and some politicians perceive them more as leisure facilities than as key players in family policy.
- Need for legislative anchoring – centers are not part of the social services system, even though they provide important preventive activities.

The SWOT analysis shows strengths (accessibility, flexibility, credibility, cooperation with municipalities) and weaknesses (financial instability, staff turnover, underappreciation of the importance of the centers). Opportunities include growing

interest in pro-family policy and municipal cooperation, while threats include economic uncertainty and dependence on political representation.

<p>Strengths</p> <p>Natural community activity Self-help Accessibility Trustworthiness Flexibility Cooperation with municipalities/regions Involvement in local government (committees) Involvement in community planning Non-specific primary prevention Awareness-raising activities Intergenerational cooperation Various forms of childcare services Professional assistance free of charge or at affordable prices Local availability of services Anonymity Activities for families with children at affordable prices Maintaining traditions</p>	<p>Weaknesses</p> <p>Instability of funding</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - This results in employee turnover (high fluctuation) - Provisional budget in the first quarter - Lack of funds for salaries and equipment renewal <p>Inactive, irresponsible, and unmotivated parents Myths about MFC centers among the public and local politicians The public does not see any deeper meaning in the existence and activities of MFC centers The role of MFC centers in the area of non-specific primary prevention is not understood Some MFC centers are not well connected to local government or involved in community planning Low allocation of subsidies Underestimation of the contribution of services Lack of multi-year funding Lack of interest in the middle class Negative view of NGOs in general Family policy is not a priority in the municipality/region/absence of a family policy concept Illegibility of MFC centers – wide range of services and focus</p>
<p>Opportunities</p> <p>Able to utilize various subsidy programs Able to adapt quickly to the current situation Promotion of volunteering Promotion of social and other services City leadership supportive of family policy Involvement of MFC centers in community planning Cooperation with social affairs departments</p>	<p>Threats</p> <p>Uncertainty of funding Uncertainty regarding premises Uncertainty regarding employees Lack of volunteers Lack of family policy concept Dependence on current political representation in the municipality and region Deterioration of the socio-economic situation of families</p>

Drawing on experience from crisis situations Municipal elections Use of financial resources from the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs by the municipality with extended power MFC as centers of primary prevention	Less interest in services among clients Postponement of problem solving by clients themselves Discontinuation of some MFC activities and services Lower level of services provided
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The role of maternity, family, and community centers in preventive work with functioning families and in community life

Why crisis prevention is crucial and what role centers play in it – or before a fire breaks out.
To introduce the topic of primary prevention, it is necessary to reiterate **the DEFINITION OF FAMILY POLICY:**

Family policy is **a set of activities and measures aimed at supporting families**. It is a **cross-cutting policy** that affects many areas of society, such as housing, education, healthcare, the labor market, and infrastructure. However, it also affects highly private areas and must therefore respect the autonomy and ability of families to make their own decisions. Family policy therefore focuses on **supporting families in performing their natural functions**. It does not seek to take over or influence social roles within the family. **The general objective of family policy is to create an overall family-friendly environment in society, through both legislative and non-legislative means.**

Source: Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs, Czech Republic

The term is important because family policy is often confused with social policy.

According to sources from the university environment (University of Hradec Králové), the definition of social policy is not clearly established in the Czech Republic, but in our experience, it is implemented in its narrowest sense, i.e., addressing adverse, emergency social situations that have already arisen.

In the Czech environment and from the perspective of the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs' competencies, social policy is perceived primarily in terms of issues relating to people with disabilities, social benefits, and social services. Family policy comes last.

It is not our task here to define social policy or to argue whether family policy should be part of the definition of social policy or whether it deserves a separate definition. In any case, maternity, family, and community centers do not belong to the social services system (but they certainly cooperate with them—contacts with experts, knowledge of the environment, contact with clients in need, connecting social service clients with centers).

Social services are already addressing the problem.

Family policy is a cross-cutting and supportive policy that promotes integration (family policy actors can encourage cooperation and discussion).

The aim of family policy is to create a welcoming and family-friendly environment in society. Every municipality wants young families with children, citizens of working age, and happy and active seniors.

The activities of the centers are preventive in nature, so let's look at the DEFINITION OF PRIMARY PREVENTION.

Primary prevention in the area of family policy consists of supporting families in all stages of life. It includes a wide range of support activities that enable families to fulfill their functions in a long-term and self-sufficient manner and help prevent risky phenomena in the family, community, and society.

Source: Prevention Working Group at the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs (working version)

Preventive measures are of fundamental importance. In healthcare, preventive checkups detect problems early on and prevent them from developing into more acute issues. We visit dentists and other specialists for regular preventive checkups, often at the first signs of pain or discomfort.

Similarly, in the field of fire protection, we have safety standards that we train for, carry out regular inspections, and install fire alarms...

We can see this parallel in prevention efforts at maternity, family, and community centers, which provide information and education to young families. These centers can be thought of as small "fire alarms" that prevent larger fires.

Which family policy actors can ensure primary prevention in family policy?

MATERNITY/FAMILY/COMMUNITY CENTER

... is a family-friendly place. It provides a safe space for all family and community members to meet, develops community life in the village, offers opportunities for the whole family to spend time actively, and, thanks to all its preventive activities, supports the development of relationships within the family and society and prevents the emergence of crisis situations in the family and society.

source: Síť pro rodinu, z.s.

PRIMARY PREVENTION IN CENTERS AND PREVENTIVE WORK METHODS

When we combine what we already know, i.e., what family policy should be about, what primary prevention is, and that the activities of the centers are preventive in nature, let's look at specific options for how primary prevention can be approached in the centers...

Centers are places of social life and drivers of community change. They harness the potential of active citizens. An active civic community has enormous self-help power. Through mutual sharing, support, and assistance, many problems can be solved at the source/locally, without the need for systemic intervention.

The same principle applies to family policy. Investing in preventive measures, such as supporting families and preventing crises, yields better long-term results than addressing problems that have already arisen. Prevention helps stabilize families, strengthen their health and cohesion, thereby improving the quality of life for children and adults and reducing the social costs associated with crisis management.

PRIMARY PREVENTION IN CENTERS

Prevention of risky situations in the family and society, i.e., preventing problems:

- through education
- preventive programs
- educational programs

Prevention of crisis situations in the family and society, i.e. finding solutions to potential problems:

- counseling
- support in finding solutions (guidance)

PRIMARY PREVENTION AT THE CENTER

Primary prevention methods at the center:

- self-help groups (mutual listening, counseling, learning and assistance, early detection of potential problems)
- guidance (support in dealing with adverse situations, contact with experts)
- low-threshold services (counseling, support services)

BENEFITS OF THE CENTER'S WORK AND ITS SERVICES FOR FAMILIES

We can look at the benefits of the centers' work from different angles. Materials from 2011 (Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs, Paloncyová) already mention the benefits of maternity, family, and community centers for the municipality, community, parents, and children.

Maternal, family, and community centers have a significant positive impact on parents, both in terms of personal development and building social support. In addition to providing direct assistance with childcare, they promote community life and contribute to the development of civil society.

The centers help caregivers cope with the threat of isolation and form new friendships. People from different social groups, professions, and with different values meet at the center. Strengthening community ties promotes a stronger identification with one's place of residence and a sense of civic belonging.

The programs offered motivate parents to try new activities and inspire them to engage in developmental activities that they can do with their children at home. Mothers share their experiences with childcare, parenting, introducing solid foods, etc. They support each other in solving relationship problems, exchange contacts for specialists, and help each other with childcare.

Active involvement in the running of the center offers parents the opportunity for personal development, gaining new experiences, and boosting their self-confidence. Providing programs for others brings self-fulfillment from various professions. Running the center is a managerial activity, which requires taking care of the formal aspects of running the association, dealing with administration and financing, communicating with authorities and partners, and promoting the center's activities to the public.

At the centers, children are placed in a group of peers, which significantly supports the socialization process. At this age, we cannot yet talk about finding friends, but rather about training skills that will later facilitate their entry into kindergarten (working in a group, participating in the program, respecting rules). Together with their parents, they practice communication skills, dealing with emotions and anger, and conflict management. Older children can develop artistic, musical, and physical skills in clubs. The programs may include literary workshops or science clubs that promote a responsible relationship with the environment.

"Similar to mothers, children identify more with their place of residence thanks to contact with families living in the neighborhood. This contributes to the prevention of negative social phenomena such as vandalism, drug addiction, etc." (Jana Paloncyová, RILSA = Research Institute for Labor and Social Affairs)

Centers may have different structures and offer various types of services depending on the needs of the region.

PYRAMID OF BENEFITS of maternal, family, and community CENTERS FOR SOCIETY



However, to varying degrees, they provide:

1st floor of the pyramid: The foundation, which is fulfilled to a certain extent by all centers

- Support for parents and development of parenting skills – in the form of education, counseling, activities for parents with children – e.g., discussions, lectures, courses
- Preventive activities aimed at preventing adverse situations in the family – e.g., sharing, safe environment
- Assistance to families in difficult life situations and crisis situations in society – refugee crisis, COVID-19 pandemic, assistance in natural disasters – e.g., material and financial assistance, legal and information counseling
- Support for the healthy psychomotor development of children – e.g., programs for children and their families
- Provision of information – e.g., specialist counseling centers, contacts for specialists, educational materials
- A natural environment for creating strong community ties and promoting social cohesion within the community – activities for families and the general public within the municipality – e.g., events for the general public, community life, networking within the community and municipality
- A family-friendly environment in the municipality – facilities for entire families, but also the definition of family policy issues – e.g., playrooms, changing tables, cafes for families, multigenerational activities

2nd level of the pyramid: Childcare and added value beyond the basic work of the center within the municipality

- Childcare in various forms (daycare centers, adaptation groups, clubs, leisure activities without parents, suburban camps)
- services beyond the scope of the center within the municipality (events for the general public, bazaars, swaps)
- additional services beyond the scope of Act No. 108/2006 Coll.,
- social services under Act No. 108/2006 Coll.

3rd floor of the pyramid: Support activities aimed at supplementing the financing of the center's operations

- accompanying children to clubs, social services, volunteer centers, coworking space, café, costume rental, photo studios, coworking, café, graphic studio, board game rental, baby carrier and scarf rental, sales

THE IMPORTANCE OF VOLUNTEERING IN CENTERS AND THE NEED FOR PROFESSIONALIZATION OF ORGANIZATIONS WORKING WITH FAMILIES

"From the very beginning, the centers have been established and managed by mothers on maternity/parental leave. Mothers participate in the activities voluntarily, and the centers operate on the principle of self-help and are informal in nature. By being established as centers for voluntary activities, they contribute to the development of civil society." (Paloncyová, 2011)

Through their activities, they contribute to the development of social life in the community and, by cooperating with local authorities, help shape the community's family and social policy.

The scope of activities and services provided by maternity, family, and community centers depends not only on the needs of the region, but above all on the human and financial resources available to the organization. Volunteering is an integral part of the centers' operations. Some centers provide part of their activities through volunteers, while others operate entirely on a volunteer basis.

THE ESTABLISHMENT OF MOTHER, FAMILY, AND COMMUNITY CENTERS

Most centers are established "from the bottom up" – among active parents who feel the need to share common moments and challenges of parenthood, not to be alone at home, and to go out with their children among other people.

A group of mothers who meet during pregnancy, at doctor's appointments, or at playgrounds strike up a conversation and discover that they share the same worries and joys. They support each other, share experiences, discuss topics such as parenting and nutrition... They feel that commercial services such as baby swimming and baby massage lack depth. Their group grows and they no longer fit in the living room, so they start looking for a larger community space.

The most active among them will establish an association, while the others will become members. They will divide up roles (who will do promotion, accounting, manage activities, social networks, etc.). They will create a program based on the current needs of the community—discussions, workshops, seminars with local lecturers (local doctors, physical therapists, school psychologists, lawyers, drawing from among their acquaintances). Often, in the beginning, they work only out of enthusiasm and for free, creating a community of that grows, and the leadership of the MFC center is often passed on to more and more people.

The milestone is the "opening" of the center to the general public—responsibility grows, duties increase, and the first DPPs are concluded, which may be the beginning of the path to professionalization.

When we talk about the professionalization of a nonprofit organization, we mean increasing the level of management and operational efficiency of the organization.

PROFESSIONALISM is important in gaining trust and maintaining relationships with partners, the community, and the public.

Even the highest quality services can lose their significance if they are not well promoted, communicated, implemented...

A professionalized NGO exhibits the following characteristics:

- The organization's management has managerial skills – there is an increase in the level of skills in the areas of organizational management, financial management, project management, strategic planning, etc. management, project management, strategic planning, etc.
- The center is transparent – whether in the area of financial management or in reporting individual financial resources, but also in the area of relationships – both external and internal.
- the organization is financially stable – it has financial planning and fundraising in place – it monitors cash flow and budgeting, has a long-term financial plan, ensures financial stability through multiple sources, and creates reserves
- Strategic documents are also an important feature – a defined vision, mission, five-year strategy, action plan, communication strategy, and, of course, the application of individual strategic documents to other activities.
- The center is working on its long-term sustainability, whether in terms of substitutability or the handover of the organization to the next generation.
- Communication skills are improving, and team communication is consistent.
- The expertise of the lecturers is also increasing, and the organization is backed by a qualified team with a professional approach.

Ensuring the professionalism of NGOs on this scale requires human and financial resources. This also involves the need to create permanent jobs, increase workloads, seek financial resources, expand services to include commercial ones, and write more projects. However, this also risks changing the essence of how they operate and gradually losing the spark with which volunteers threw themselves into their work. The center then risks losing its community spirit and may behave more like a commercial entity.

However, professionalized centers have the capacity for larger projects, which in turn expands the range of services offered.

VOLUNTEERING is WELCOME and DESIRED in direct work and activities that are not essential to the continuity and preservation of the center. However, it is UNDESIRABLE in the coordination and management of the center.

Volunteer centers face a high turnover of people involved in running the center. When parental leave ends, the center is handed over to a new generation—continuity is threatened, new management is repeatedly trained, functioning contacts are interrupted, and activities may even decline ...

This fluctuation can sometimes bring a breath of fresh air, but more often than not, it is a step backwards before everything gets back on track.

However, even coordinators/directors of centers who have already managed to obtain full-time positions continue to work volunteer hours beyond their regular duties (meaning work performed voluntarily without remuneration, not volunteering in the sense of the relevant law).

Volunteering in no way diminishes the value of the centers' contributions; on the contrary, it points to the need for professionalization and thus financial stabilization of the centers. It is desirable and sought after only in activities that are not essential to the running and maintenance of the organization.

Where are we headed as the Czech Republic and the national network of centers?

The future of *Sít' pro rodinu* and individual centers is closely linked to the state's family policy. The Family Policy Strategy 2023–2030 emphasizes the need to support a family-friendly environment, primary prevention, and cooperation between the state, regions, municipalities, and civil society.

Sít' pro rodinu strives for:

- Multi-year and predictable funding for centers at all levels (national, regional, municipal).
- Legislative anchoring of the role of centers as key actors in prevention in the forthcoming law on child protection and family support.
- Strengthening cooperation with local governments, which have a fundamental influence on the development and stability of the centers in practice.
- Professionalization of organizations to ensure their long-term sustainability and quality of services.
- Raising awareness of the contribution of centers so that they are more widely perceived as irreplaceable partners in creating a family-friendly environment.

The centers have the potential to grow further as community bases that connect generations, strengthen social cohesion, and contribute to making the Czech Republic a family-friendly country.

The History of Mother Centers in Bulgaria

Contributed by Integro Association Bulgaria. <https://integrob.org/en/>

Roma Mother Centres as Local Care Infrastructure

In Bulgaria, care continues to be treated predominantly as a social service function rather than as a structural element of governance. Public intervention is organised around administrative procedures, eligibility criteria and case management frameworks. However, for families living in structural vulnerability, the decisive issue is not whether services exist in formal terms, but whether the system itself is accessible, coherent and capable of early stabilisation. Where access is conditional, fragmented or reactive, vulnerability accumulates and deepens.

In municipalities such as Botevgrad, Mezdra and Byala Slatina, this structural dynamic becomes visible in marginalised neighbourhoods characterised by multidimensional deprivation. It is essential to underline that Roma communities in Bulgaria are internally diverse in socio-economic status and degree of inclusion. This paper does not approach Roma communities as a homogeneous category. It focuses specifically on families experiencing severe and overlapping forms of poverty in neighbourhoods where housing insecurity, administrative exclusion and limited institutional reach intersect.

Housing governance constitutes a central structural factor in this equation. In many marginalised areas, families reside in overcrowded dwellings, informal constructions or properties without full legal recognition. Even in the absence of immediate eviction threats, the absence of formalised status creates persistent insecurity. Crucially, Bulgarian administrative systems link access to social assistance, child benefits, healthcare entitlements and school-related services to registered address. Housing instability therefore translates directly into restricted access to rights.

This produces a systemic phenomenon that can be described as administrative exclusion. Families may legally qualify for support yet remain practically excluded due to procedural barriers. Incomplete documentation, unclear property status, limited literacy and complex bureaucratic requirements create cumulative obstacles. For families living under economic stress, navigating such procedures becomes an additional burden. Meanwhile, social workers operate under high caseload pressure, limiting their ability to provide proactive outreach. The system thus implicitly expects the most vulnerable to initiate contact, despite existing mistrust and fear.

Within institutional practice, indicators such as inadequate housing conditions, low income or irregular school attendance are interpreted as risk factors. While legitimate from a child protection perspective, such indicators often remain disconnected from

their structural context. Field engagement in Botevgrad and Mezdra consistently demonstrates that parental attachment and commitment are present even in situations of extreme deprivation. The constraints families face are environmental rather than relational. When poverty is framed as behavioural deficiency rather than systemic disadvantage, institutional responses risk shifting from preventive support to corrective oversight.

The consequences are cumulative. Minor documentation gaps may lead to delayed benefits. Housing-related irregularities may prevent address registration, limiting access to healthcare or educational services. School absenteeism may trigger disciplinary measures rather than structural mediation. Fear of institutional escalation may delay voluntary contact with services. By the time formal intervention occurs, vulnerability has intensified and the space for preventive action has narrowed.

Institutionalising Preventive Governance through Community-Based Care

This reveals a broader structural challenge within Bulgarian governance. Over the past decade, significant reforms have aimed at deinstitutionalisation and child protection modernisation. However, preventive infrastructure at neighbourhood level remains underdeveloped. Housing policy is rarely integrated into social planning frameworks. Education systems identify absenteeism without structured coordination with housing mediation mechanisms. Healthcare services operate independently of community-level trust structures. Fragmentation weakens cumulative public investment and limits preventive impact.

Against this backdrop, Mother Centres in Botevgrad, Mezdra and Byala Slatina function as locally embedded care infrastructure. Their significance lies not in scale or service volume, but in structural positioning. They operate as intermediary platforms situated within neighbourhood environments, grounded in continuity, trust and relational proximity. They do not replace institutions, nor do they function as parallel systems. Instead, they reduce institutional distance and enable earlier engagement.

The centres provide parenting support, health mediation, assistance with documentation procedures and educational guidance. Yet their primary contribution is relational stabilisation. Families approach these spaces without fear of sanction. Conversations occur before crisis thresholds are reached. Emerging risks are identified in informal settings where dialogue precedes formal escalation.

In Botevgrad, sustained interaction between the centre and municipal actors has gradually improved communication regarding social assistance access and documentation barriers. In Mezdra, coordination has enabled earlier discussion of school attendance concerns within a supportive framework rather than through disciplinary channels. In Byala Slatina, activities conducted within community-based

environments demonstrate that preventive infrastructure depends fundamentally on legitimacy and continuity rather than physical facilities alone.

Selfcare represents a crucial governance dimension of this model. In households experiencing prolonged structural poverty, women disproportionately carry caregiving responsibilities. Chronic economic stress, housing insecurity and social stigma erode emotional resilience. Without supportive spaces, isolation deepens and household stability weakens. Mother Centres create structured environments in which caregiving labour is recognised and collectively processed. Selfcare in this context functions as preventive infrastructure. Strengthened caregivers contribute directly to more resilient family systems, reducing the likelihood of institutional crisis intervention.

Over time, these centres also generate participatory dynamics. Women who initially engage as participants frequently assume facilitative or mediating roles. They articulate concerns related to housing conditions, neighbourhood infrastructure and access to services. They engage in structured dialogue with municipal representatives. In municipalities where historical distrust has shaped relations between marginalised neighbourhoods and authorities, such gradual trust-building has significant political relevance. It enhances institutional legitimacy and expands preventive reach.

Trust is not an abstract concept in this context. It directly influences whether families seek support voluntarily, whether information flows early and whether conflict escalates. Preventive governance requires relational mechanisms capable of reducing adversarial dynamics. Mother Centres provide precisely such mechanisms. By mediating communication, clarifying procedures and offering accompaniment, they prevent minor vulnerabilities from becoming structural crises.

The broader governance implication is clear. Prevention is most effective when embedded in everyday community life rather than delivered episodically through administrative intervention. Care must be institutionalised not as emergency response but as continuous infrastructure.

This shift requires deliberate political commitment.

First, community-based care hubs must be formally integrated into municipal preventive governance frameworks. Recognition should include participation in local coordination councils and inclusion within municipal social service strategies. Without formal anchoring, their preventive capacity remains vulnerable to funding volatility.

Second, stable municipal co-financing mechanisms are essential. Preventive infrastructure cannot depend solely on short-term external funding. Trust-based engagement requires continuity measured in years rather than project cycles.

Third, regulatory review is necessary regarding strict linkage between address registration and access to social protection. Flexible administrative mechanisms should ensure that families residing in informal housing conditions are not structurally excluded from rights.

Fourth, integrated municipal governance must be strengthened. Housing policy, social assistance, education and healthcare require coordinated planning structures capable of addressing overlapping vulnerabilities holistically.

Fifth, structured support for women's community leadership should be embedded within local development strategies. Women functioning as mediators extend institutional reach and enhance early-warning capacity within neighbourhoods.

Institutionalising care as infrastructure demands a shift from reactive governance to preventive governance. It requires recognising that structural vulnerability cannot be addressed solely through case-based intervention. It necessitates embedding relational stabilisation within municipal architecture itself.

Mother Centres in Botevgrad, Mezdra and Byala Slatina demonstrate that such infrastructure is feasible within the Bulgarian context. They offer a grounded and replicable approach to preventive governance built on proximity, continuity and cooperation. This model does not attribute vulnerability to ethnicity and does not shift responsibility onto families. Instead, it addresses structural disadvantage while strengthening institutional capacity and legitimacy.

If Bulgaria is to move toward a more resilient and preventive governance model, care must be institutionalised as infrastructure rather than treated as temporary support. The experience of these municipalities indicates that when relational care mechanisms are embedded within local governance, structural vulnerability can be mitigated before it escalates into systemic crisis. That transformation is not technical alone. It is fundamentally political.

Vision for Mother Centers in Ukraine

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The current situation in Ukraine

In September 2025, Ukraine officially joined the Mother Centers International Network for Empowerment (MINE). This has provided new opportunities for the creation, support, and development of a network of Mother Centers (MC) in Ukraine and is helping to build and develop a democratic partnership with Europe, horizontal management models, and implement inclusive solutions at the local level in Ukraine.

With the start of Russia's full-scale invasion in 2022, Mother Centers in Germany, Slovakia, the Czech Republic, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and other European countries began to welcome Ukrainian women, creating an inclusive environment where they could once again feel safe, supported, respected, and participate in community life. Women who received support at the Mother Centers in Munich and Stuttgart (which are twin towns of Kyiv and Khmelnytskyi, respectively) began to share their experiences with women in Ukraine. With the active support of MINE, this became the inspiration for the launch of a project to create Mother Centers in Kyiv, Volochysk (Khmelnyskyi region), and Khmelnytskyi by a group of active women from Ukraine who united around the values of mutual support, safety, education, and self-realization to create spaces where women not only receive help but also actively participate in creating a new culture of empathy, support, and human dignity. Despite the dangers of military action, lack of resources, and absence of a clear state strategy for support and funding, the initiative continues its activities and development.

The Kyiv MC is building a large community of Ukrainian women who need support both in Ukraine and in Germany, and organizes educational workshops in Munich and Kyiv, both offline and online. It is currently actively cooperating with the “Office of the Free State of Bavaria in Kyiv” to build close cooperation between the governments of Munich and Kyiv as twin towns, and also to establish and operate the MC in Kyiv at the state level.

With the support of the local municipality, the Volochysk MC already has its own premises and the NGO “Spilno-Prostir” and is actively working to support women and children who have been forced to leave their homes due to active military conflict. The MC in Volochysk has a permanent integration space where children, mothers with children, and anyone else who wants to can receive humanitarian aid and spend time together playing board games, building with construction sets, and reading books over tea. There are also psychological support groups for parents, psychological relief

training sessions, legal consultations, educational sessions, sports classes, and integration and cultural excursions.

A group of active women from Khmelnytskyi supports the creation of the MC and is currently building cooperation with the Rokada Charitable Foundation. The immediate plans include the joint opening of the Kolo integration support center with maternity rooms to strengthen the social cohesion of vulnerable groups in the Khmelnytskyi community. It will be a safe, supportive, and resourceful space for vulnerable groups (women with children, internally displaced persons, people with disabilities, and older people), which will promote their social adaptation, improve their psycho-emotional state, and strengthen social cohesion.

All three MC initiatives in Ukraine participate in international conferences, where they have the opportunity to be inspired by initiatives from other countries and learn from their experience in creating and supporting the work of Mother Centres.

History of the Mother Centers Network in Ukraine

The prototypes of Mother Centers in Ukraine began to appear in the late 1990s under the influence of the European self-help movement, which inspired women, especially mothers, to create spaces for mutual support, volunteering, and participation in community life. The main goal of their creation was to strengthen democracy through the active participation of women in the development of society, particularly at the local level. These initiatives arose at the intersection of community needs and women's strong desire to be heard, supported, and involved in positive changes in society.

Despite the difficult socio-economic situation, proactive women in various regions of Ukraine began to create such spaces, often voluntarily. These were small but very important communities that provided support to young mothers, organized children's spaces, cultural events, and educational initiatives. Unfortunately, beyond small initiatives that relied solely on volunteerism, this movement did not develop or scale up.

Difficulties and achievements

The main challenge for the development of civil society organizations in Ukraine is the lack of systematic state support, the complex political situation, and the long-standing patriarchal culture, which, although not to the same extent, still limits women's participation in decision-making, especially at the state level. Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 posed an additional serious challenge. Many initiatives were forced to suspend their activities or evacuate. The full-scale war caused a humanitarian crisis and the internal displacement of millions of people, most of whom are women and children. However, despite these challenges, Ukraine is demonstrating the strength of its civil society, openness to international initiatives, and a desire to build democracy in practice. It is precisely at this time that Ukrainian women have shown

extraordinary resilience and self-reliance. Some initiatives have transformed into volunteer hubs providing assistance to internally displaced persons, while others have become centers for humanitarian aid, psycho-emotional support, and creative initiatives for children and adults. It is in such conditions that democratic values began to be put into practice: through horizontal structures, openness, solidarity, mutual support, and shared responsibility. Despite the fact that these initiatives do not receive centralized state funding and support, they are sustained by initiative, volunteerism, solidarity, and partnerships at the local and international levels. One such example is the Rokada Charitable Foundation, an organization with over 20 years of experience in the humanitarian field, which has offices in 16 regions of Ukraine. The Foundation's mission is to provide comprehensive support to internally displaced persons (IDPs), vulnerable groups, Ukrainian refugees returning home (returnees), veterans and their families, affected populations, asylum seekers, and refugees from more than 40 countries (Afghanistan, Sudan, Syria, etc.), facilitating their integration into host communities, protecting their rights, and creating conditions for social, economic, and psychological recovery. Also, in western Ukraine, for example, in the Khmelnytskyi community, there is a significant number of internally displaced persons who are in difficult life circumstances and need comprehensive social support, so proactive women from the city of Khmelnytskyi are creating communities to address urgent needs and improve the conditions of people in need of assistance.

The importance of Mother and Family Centers and their significance for forced refugees from Ukraine

Mother and Family Centers in Germany, Slovakia, the Czech Republic, and other European countries are unique spaces for meeting, support, and personal development, where women can not only receive help but also actively participate in community life, undergo a peaceful adaptation among people who accept everyone without judgment and with deep understanding, who are ready to provide moral and informational support at any time. Provide moral and informational support at any time.

With the outbreak of full-scale war in Ukraine in 2022, many people, especially women with children and the elderly, were forced to seek refuge abroad. People did not know the language, had no money, no belongings, no support from friends, etc. It was especially difficult for children (they missed their families and friends) and women with small children (given their limited communication skills (not knowing German) and long queues for daycare). Children and mothers could have been left alone with their problems and concerns. Thanks to the Mother and Family Centers, refugees from Ukraine were able to find a safe environment of trust and mutual understanding, and received social integration and assistance from women and mothers like themselves. Here, people were able to overcome language barriers, meet residents and migrant women from other countries, learn about the cultures and traditions of different peoples, and receive free basic language courses while their children played safely

nearby. They received help in filling out and writing various necessary official forms and documents, etc. Refugee women were also actively involved in organizing events (cooking meetings, cultural evenings, handicrafts, children's parties) where they shared their experiences and passed on the cultural traditions of their country. After adapting, some women began to help newly arrived refugees as translators, mentors, or coordinators and took an active part in volunteering, and some even became employees or coordinators of the center. All this contributes to the establishment of horizontal connections of "equals helping equals," which is one of the values of MINE. Participation in the joint activities of the Mother and Family Centers provides an opportunity to develop organizational, language, and intercultural skills, which is a very important step towards professional fulfillment, active participation in society, and greater independence in everyday life. Joint work, educational and creative projects in Mother and Family Centers have helped women and children restore their inner resources after the experience of war and forced migration. The feeling of usefulness and belonging had a very positive effect on the psycho-emotional state of forced migrants, and children were able to find friends, which gave them greater confidence, facilitated adaptation, and quickly removed the language barrier. Older women, in turn, had the opportunity to share their experiences and pass on their knowledge to the younger generation. Mother and Family Centers create a space where women can simultaneously care for children of all ages (even infants) and participate in joint activities. This removes barriers associated with childcare and allows mothers to remain active in public life, which has a very positive effect on their psychological and emotional state. Thanks to the participation of Ukrainian women, Mother and Family Centers are becoming more diverse, multicultural, and open. The exchange of cultural experiences enriches society and the refugees from Ukraine themselves, which automatically has a positive impact on Ukrainian society as well, as Ukrainian women share their experiences, encouraging the opening of similar Mother and Family Centers in Ukraine, where people are in great need of support and such centers can become a hub of safety, information assistance, inspiration, resourceful psycho-emotional enrichment, and stabilization.

The future: Ukraine as a democratic state through women's leadership

Ukraine is still undergoing a difficult but extremely important transition from a post-Soviet centralized system to a democratic society with active citizen participation. On the one hand, there is the reality of war and post-traumatic experiences. On the other hand, there is the tremendous potential of women's (since most active male figures are on the front lines) civic initiatives that unite, support, and build trust. The network of Mother Centers has the potential to become one of the driving forces behind this process, both in large cities and in small communities.

Today, Mother Centers are not just places of care. They are **centers of local democracy**, participation, and the future, where women play a key role in shaping civil society.

The goal of the Mother Centers initiative

- **Scaling:** to expand presence in the regions of Ukraine and create a national network of Mother Centers
- **Developing democracy through women's leadership:** MCs as platforms for public dialogue, trust building, and grassroots initiatives.
- **Institutionalization:** including MCs in national policy strategies as part of the social protection, community, education, and culture systems
- **International partnership:** integrating the Ukrainian MC network into European and Danube projects

We see Ukraine as an active participant in the MINE movement:

- A country where every community can have its own MC
- Where women not only receive help, but also become drivers of change themselves
- Where volunteering, equality, democratic participation, and inclusion are not just values, but daily practice
- Mother Centers in Ukraine are a bridge between trauma and hope. They are a platform for a new democracy in action.
- Ukraine is open to partnership, exchange of experience, and joint work on a future where women are not alone.

Mother Centers in Ukraine are designed to become a space for women and children that will simultaneously perform social, educational, psychotherapeutic, cultural, and community functions. A space where they teach, support, inspire—and in doing so, shape a new generation of local leaders and provide support to absolutely everyone who needs it.

Lessons learned from the country profiles: diversity as strength in the Danube Region

The country profiles presented in this publication demonstrate that there is no single model for building Caring Communities. The Danube Region encompasses countries with very different economic capacities, welfare systems, political cultures, and levels of institutional support for social care. Western parts of the region often operate within more established social service frameworks, while several Eastern and South-Eastern countries face tighter public budgets, less institutionalized support structures, and greater reliance on informal networks.

These economic and policy differences shape how Mother Centers and Caring Communities emerge and function. In some contexts, municipalities can act as proactive partners with access to funding and professional infrastructure. In others, grassroots initiatives compensate for limited public resources through volunteerism,

creativity, and strong local solidarity. Both approaches offer valuable lessons: structured cooperation models from wealthier regions can provide stability and scalability, while resource-sensitive, community-driven innovation from less affluent contexts demonstrates flexibility and resilience.

A particularly important insight from several Eastern European country profiles is the continued presence of strong social capital in rural and small-town communities. Despite economic hardship and demographic decline, many of these areas retain dense interpersonal networks, traditions of mutual support, and a culture of informal cooperation. While such social capital is under pressure due to migration and ageing populations, it remains a powerful asset. New caring structures—when strategically designed and supported by municipalities—can build on this foundation. By combining local trust networks with professional coordination and long-term planning, rural areas can become laboratories for innovative, community-based care solutions.

The profiles also highlight the importance of cultural context. Attitudes toward care, gender roles, civic participation, and state responsibility differ significantly across the region. In some countries, care is still perceived primarily as a family obligation, often carried by women. In others, there is stronger public recognition of care as a shared societal responsibility. Effective policy design must therefore be culturally sensitive and adaptable, acknowledging these differences while gradually promoting more equitable and sustainable models.

Precisely because of this diversity, the Danube Region holds unique potential as a model for Europe. It is one of the few macro-regions where Western and Eastern European realities meet within a structured framework of cooperation. This intersection creates opportunities to test integrated approaches that respond to varying economic conditions, governance traditions, and demographic pressures. Solutions developed here must be both efficient and adaptable—qualities that make them relevant for the broader European context.

By fostering cross-border learning and collaboration, the Danube Region can demonstrate how economic disparities and cultural differences need not be obstacles, but can instead drive innovation. If municipalities and Caring Communities learn from one another and develop strategic partnerships across these diverse contexts, the region can become a testing ground for scalable, resilient, and socially inclusive models of care—models that Europe as a whole urgently needs.

Final Conclusion

Europe's multiple crises are most visible at the local level—but this is also where meaningful change can begin. Across the Danube Region, demographic shifts are reshaping our societies: fewer children are being born, populations are ageing rapidly, and there are simply not enough people to carry the growing burden of care. For too

long, this responsibility has fallen disproportionately on women, often unpaid and unrecognized. This model is no longer sustainable.

If we are to respond realistically to labour shortages, ageing societies, and social fragmentation, we must rethink how care is organized, valued, and shared. Care cannot remain invisible, informal, and gendered—it must become a central pillar of local development and public policy. This requires restructuring our social systems to reflect today's demographic realities and tomorrow's needs.

This paper has shown that when municipalities and community-based initiatives such as Mother Centers work in partnership, care becomes a shared societal responsibility rather than a private struggle. Investing in community infrastructure is not an optional social measure; it is a strategic response to demographic change, workforce shortages, and democratic challenges.

A Caring Europe will not be built through policy declarations alone, but through practical cooperation between local governments and empowered communities. By institutionalizing care, supporting women's leadership, and strengthening community-based solutions, municipalities and regional programmes can lay the foundation for a more resilient, equitable, and socially cohesive future.

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