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The significance of Mother Centers for the Balkan region – example of Mother Centers in Bosnia

The Mother Centers International Network (**mine**) is the result of a grassroots women's movement that started in Germany as a consequence of a research project at the German Youth Institute in Munich. The first three model Mother Centers were funded by the German Government Department for Family Affairs. After publication of the Book: "Mothers in the Center - Mother Centers" in 1985 they spread "like a virus" through peer visits and exchanges throughout Germany and neighboring countries. Following the transition in Central and Eastern Europe Mother Centers were created from the bottom up as self help initiatives in the Czech and Slovak Republics, in Bulgaria, and Bosnia Herzegowina.. World wide there are now some 750 mother centers , including Africa and North America.

Mother Centers address the needs of women and children and recreate family and neighborhood structures in the community where modernisation in the West and totalitarian systems and war in the East have destroyed them. They empower mothers and create new channels for female participation and leadership in communities. They are an innovative model on how to strengthen civil society and democracy by revitalising neighborhoods and community culture.

They are melting pots in the community for women of diverse class and ethnic backgrounds to meet and join forces to deal with everyday life issues, to create community services and to channel resources to the grassroots level.

The process of transfer and replication of the Mother Centers into Central and Eastern Europe has been supported by the migration and remigration movements caused both by the break down of socialism and by the wars in the region. Refugee families to Germany found in the Mother Centers a "home away from home" as well as a "home to take home" when returning to their countries of origin. The creation of the Mother Center International Network provided further support. The network provides start up support and step by step consultation for Mother Center initiatives, as well as trainings, study tours and peer learning exchanges among the centers in the region. Face to face exchanges prove to be a very powerful tool for the replication and transfer of exemplary practices on the grassroots level.

Mother Centers though originating in the West also apply to the conditions of post-socialist and post war societies.. Many women in these societies find themselves at home with children, due to the increase of unemployment, and the reduction of public childcare. The isolation they face is especially virulent due to the fact that in socialist societies the tradition of community networks was discontinued and social coherence and inclusion often regulated by the workplace. Unemployment, war trauma and unprecedented poverty often leads to disorientation and retreat into depression and apathy. Balkan countries are currently characterised by a disorientation of social roles and life patterns, concerning poverty, gender relations, and religious and ethnic traditions. When systems that previously safeguarded social integration and cohesion like full employment, peace,. the extended family or village networks break down, people need new spaces to meet, reorientate themselves and reweave the torn social fabric.

Communities need a place where they can reassemble and relearn to establish confidence in social contacts and trust in building democracy from the bottom up. Mother Centers provide such a space.

THE EXAMPLE OF BOSNIA HERZOGOWINA

In Bosnia Herzegovina the war destroyed social and public life. Social security was based on extended family and collective networks. War has torn apart these networks, destroyed families, neighborhoods and villages, dispelled people from their homes, home towns and communities and created an individualisation process unknown of previously in Bosnian society.

Inter ethnic tensions are supplemented in post war Bosnian society by a social war between "have and have nots", between people that have profited from the war and those that have lost everything. Practically every woman in Bosnia has a background of family separation or war trauma.

The population in cities in Bosnia Herzegovina is almost entirely composed of migrants, those re-migrating from Germany as well as refugees from other parts of the former Yugoslavia, who had to leave their homes during and after the war. The unemployment rate is high, social structures have been completely destroyed. This leaves especially old people and single mothers very vulnerable, without family back-up and support. These groups have the highest rate of poverty and health problems.

In this situation Mother Centers are a contact point in the community, especially for single mothers and for the elderly where they can turn to and find a listening ear and a helping hand. After an exchange with Germany Mother Center initiatives have started in Zavidovici, Sarajewo and in Sanski Most:

"I am alone now, I need to make new ties. I cannot rely anymore on my family or relations. They are no more. For me joining the mother center initiative is a way to create a new family" (Sanski Most)

"With this project we are creating both job opportunities for women as well as support and services for the most vulnerable groups in society. We create an interface in the community for groups with different ethnic backgrounds. We have learned that we need to reweave social networks just as much as we need to rebuild the houses and infrastructure of our cities, which have been destroyed.."
(Mother Center Initiative Sarajewo)

"I am a self supportive mother, I have 3 children, I have DM 300 per month, I dont work. I like the idea of Mother Center because I am all the time at home and I like to meet the other women. I feel isolated, I am all the day at home. The mother center gives me an opportunity to go out of the house and meet women and still be with my children. I know how to sew. So I can contribute that. I would even like to give some money for that , even if I am so poor, I would like to contribute even with money for that idea. " (Sarajewo)

"I dont work and my husband does not work. I have two children, one 6 years, and one 2. I like to have the opportunity for my children to be with other children. I like to have space and for us all to be together. .It is an opportunity for me to meet my neighbors and to learn from other women. I dont have any relatives or friends here. I dont feel comfortable going to consultations and professional services, I rather meet with other mothers and other families. We learn from each other." (Mother Center Flame, Zavidovici)

In the centers young and old, migrants and ex patriates, and families from different ethnic backgrounds regroup to support each other in dealing with the everyday life issues of families and neighborhoods.

80% of refugees and displaced persons in Bosnia are women and children. Bosnia is faced with redeveloping after a war and also after being a socialist country. It is also in the situation of transition of political systems. Women are most effected and most excluded in this process. The relations between refugees and displaced persons and local people are torn. Women are the ones who make these relations.

"Reconciliation is a very difficult process. Residents who stayed to defend their homes or chose to stay in their country need to realise that refugees who went abroad were forced to leave, and that they also contributed in making public awareness of what is going on in Bosnia. They need to

learn to accept the displaced people and see that they have the same destiny as they. Also it is not so easy to accept people of ethnic minorities. They have to learn not to identify their neighbors with the whole nations, also because the amnesty law they have to learn to accept those who killed them. It is a very hard process. With ethnic minorities who are also refugees, it is mostly the women who make these connections. Women are first sent to soften the atmosphere and when they have succeeded in making the first contacts and softening the atmosphere, then usually the men come.

Women are faced also with their new status. They have become head of households and are becoming economically self supportive, since they lost their husbands. This is a new role for women., Women are faced with lack of access to power, to resources, lack of childcare, only 4 % of pre school children are in childcare. There is a lack of services for family needs. Women are often isolated, and marginalised. And for the women who work, there life is very hard, because of lack of services.

Redevelopment programs are going on in Bosnia, most all of them regard women as recipients of aid.

The Mother Centers regard women as survivors of the war, and as providers and producers of aid. They come together to create their own solutions. The women are seen as experts of their everyday lives and of their communities. Women need a place and space where they can come together and contribute to these reconciliation programs. They can organise themselves and create own solutions and they will also benefit the community as a whole. “ (Mother Center Initiative Sarajewo)

Mother Centers differ from the usual social work deficit oriented approach: "You have a problem. Come to us, the experts, for help". The mother center approach is the other way around: "You are good at at least one thing. Come to the mother center and contribute it to the community."

Mother Centers are self managed. The core of the project is a daily drop-in coffee shop with childcare included. Activities involve projects that help lower expenses for families and that support families in their everyday chores as well as in times of crisis. They include services like childcare, second hand shop, midday meals, toy library, sewing classes, as well as trainings to expand skills and help re-enter the labor market like language courses, gardening, computer and job retraining courses as well as to create new businesses and income generating opportunities. Holistic health services are part of the daily program.

Preventive family policy measures that preserve healthy families and neighborhoods are considered wise investments by western welfare states and public and private funding for family self help groups is available in countries like Germany, Austria and Holland.

In Central and Eastern Europe public funds are more difficult to attain, mainly due to the fact that little or no money for social policies of this kind is available in municipal and state budgets. In these countries the local Mother Centers however have been successful in acquiring rooms and land from the municipalities and funds from foundations and the private sector.

The power of the Mother Center movement lies in the claiming of public space in the communities, the "public living room" as the centers call themselves, a place where every day life experience is acknowledged and valued as expertise. In the centers, women learn to recognise and pool their skills and resources and to support each other in developing their leadership potential. The Mother Centers have been successful in involving women in local governance by creating a platform for the issues of parenting and every day family life to be linked to municipal and regional policies in the interest of a family and child friendly society and environment.

Mother Centers create social networks that allow for less anonymous neighborhoods and more tolerance and social peace in the communities. Healthy neighbourhoods are an important element for the social integration and democratic functioning of societies. Anonymous environments and isolation are key elements leading to violence and racism. The Mother Centers contribute to creating and sustaining strong neighborhoods by providing an open, safe and caring place for families from all walks of life. The negative spiral of defeat, shame and withdrawal is counteracted in the non-stigmatising atmosphere of the centers. The mother center culture of friendship and practical support helps to regain self-confidence and recognise and reorganise options.

Mother Centers have impact on many levels. They influence the quality of parenting and child socialisation as well as the quality of family relations. They revitalise neighborhoods, bring new family services and facilities to the communities, as well as bringing a grassroots partner to local governance.

On the individual level dimensions gained include support in conflict and crisis situations, employment perspectives, more self confidence, and improved gender equity. Capacities gained include improved stress resistance, organising and negotiation skills, capacity to work in teams, increased willingness to take responsibility, and enhanced communication skills.

PARTNERSHIPS

The history of the Mother Center movement provides an interesting example

of successful partnerships between grassroots, academia, professional institutions and government.

In Germany, without the support of the German Youth Institute mother centers would probably not have been established, nor proved sustainable. Partnerships with mainstream actors and institutions remain to be an important element in the development of the Mother Center movement.

Taking the example of the Bosnian Mother Centers again the necessity of partnerships is very clear. While Mother Centers have proven to be a concept that can mobilise self help and strong forces and resources on the ground, they need support from professional partners. On the level of negotiation for public acknowledgement and resources in municipalities as well as by hands on support and expertise.

The following is a list of opportunities for initiating Mother Centers as described by the existing Bosnian Mother Center initiatives:

We identified four possibilities for opening Mother Centers:

- One is forming partnerships with the kindergardens.

Kindergardens as public institutions, offer half of their space for mother centers, so the mothers get space for themselves there. Partnerships with kindergardens means building partnership with the local authorities and with the ministry of education.

- Another possibility is using the privatisation process.. Residents associations are becoming owners of homes and buildings that include common rooms for residents meetings and neighborhood boards and outside gardens. We have realised that women are those that are most concerned with looking out for their building and their environment. so it would be a possibility to organise in Mother Centers. What often happens with these rooms is that the residents sell them to have money to repair roofs and facades. We need to persuade them to keep the rooms, to have a space of their own. As women are the majority of these neighborhood boards it is a possibility of getting space for women.

- The third possibility is to rent rooms, but the rent is very high.

- The fourth possibility is the private model of Mother Center. A few women that have some resources can go and buy a house for opening a Mother Center.”

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Currently 3 Mother Centers exist in Sarajevo, Zavidovici and Sanski; Most with the support of the Robert Bosch Foundation, Germany.

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