



Mother Centers Germany

All about us

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The Story of the Mother Centers in Germany

The story of the mother centers in Germany is quite spectacular – they spread from 3 to over 400 in a decade and a half, they are the fastest growing grassroots women's movement currently in Germany, they have widened and changed the scope of women's politics and feminism.

Mother centers originated out of a study conducted at the German Youth Institute in Munich in the late 70's, where young families were interviewed on their daily life situation, their relationship to family policy and parent education programs and on what they would consider as support in their daily life.

Out of this study the concept of mother centers was developed and put into practice in three model mother centers which were funded by the Family Ministry in 1981 in three German cities. These three centers were accompanied by research by the German Youth Institute for three years.

The resulting report was not written as a sociological text but rather the research team supported the women involved in the first three mother centers in an extensive process to write their own stories and put a book together out of these texts. This book, first published in 1985, because it contained the authentic grassroots voices and story telling of the women involved, proved to be magic.

The result was overwhelming. The book titled „Mothers in the Center – Mother Centers“ created a grassroots movement. Women read it and basically had two responses:

„This is it!“ And: „We can do it, too“.

We now count over 400 mother centers in Germany (West as well as East), and the movement is still growing. It has also spread to Austria, Switzerland, Holland, Italy, the Czech Republic and Bosnia Herzegowina, the USA, Canada and the Philippines.

Why?

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

Parents also often lack peer contacts. Parent education and outreach programs often reach only a small segment of middle class families and are ineffective with others.

Many parents have negative associations towards school-like structures and the teacher-student hierarchy many parent education programs convey.

Mothers often experience a process of loss of self-confidence, when living at home with children, a life, which demands different rhythms and laws than those consti-

tuted by public norms. They speak of a „trap“: On the one hand mothering demands an incredible growth of responsibility, competence and self-reliance. On the other hand, they are cut off from public values which are based on money and on principles of success and competition in (full-time) labor market participation.

In the mother centers public visibility is created for female life styles. The name itself is a validation of the contribution of mothers to society.

The centers create public spaces to voice the issues that are prevalent when „looking at the world through the eyes of a woman with a child at her hand“. They are a place where mothers raise their self esteem and confidence to claim participation and leadership in designing neighborhoods and communities.



Mother centers are a place where women organise without being clientalised. Women can experience themselves as experts on their own lives, supporting each other on equal footing and creating problem solving strategies for themselves and their environment.

Owning Motherhood

Mother centers are a place where women own motherhood. Women today are confronted with strong contradictory ideologies in public culture. On the one side is the role model of the perfect mother, sacrificing all her needs and interests for the benefit and

well being of the child and the family. Of course this image is impossible to live up to. On the other hand, however, there is an alternative public ideology, gaining ground in northern societies, portraying children as a burden and barrier for self realisation of women and personal freedom. This image escapes the reality of personal development through the experience of motherhood.

In the mother centers women have reflective space to confront and challenge both ideologies and to collectively build their identities and images of motherhood on their own real experiences and interests.

Public Living Rooms

Mother centers offer peer contact and exchange on a drop in basis in their daily coffee shops as well as household and personal support services. The centers are often described as „public living rooms“. They allow women and children to claim public space.

The centers are organized by the mothers themselves. Their resources and skills are pooled to offer services, such as child- and eldercare, counseling, wellness or household services.

Each center is uniquely defined by the skills, know how and ideas of the women involved. In this approach, women have the opportunity to gain self esteem and earn supplemental income in „family friendly“ work roles accommodating individual family routines.

How ?

The core of the mother center project is a daily drop-in coffee shop with childcare included. The entry point is unintimidating, a cup of coffee or a visit to the mother center second hand shop.

Women can come in at any time when it fits their family rhythm and meet other women and children. A lot of role model learning about parenting happens around the coffee table in the centers.

The approach is not a social work approach: professionals saying: if you have a

problem, come to us, we can help you. It is a self empowerment approach: grassroots women as peers saying: we have a place here where you can relax, where we can talk, where you can find out and focus on your needs and what you are good at and how we can join together to get what we want. The slogan of the mother center is „Everybody is good at at least one thing – and can contribute it to the center.“

Activities in the centers involve:

- ❖ Projects that help lower expenses for families like: second hand shop, hair cutting, midday meals, sewing classes, repair services;
- ❖ Crisis counseling and support;
- ❖ Know-how on parenting (breast feeding, nutrition, what do I do when a child doesn't stop crying);
- ❖ Trainings like language courses, computer courses;
- ❖ Relaxation and holistic health services like reflexology, massages;
- ❖ Job training and retraining;

Services are designed to help make the centers sustainable. Childcare is offered for all ages including playgroups, kindergarten and after school care. Eldercare includes daytime mobile care with nursing, house-keeping and escort services, and intergenerational activities. All services offered provide reliable support in everyday chores, creating an animated meeting point in the neighborhood for all generations. The quality of services has more of a family than an institutional character.

Paid Work

Mother centers promote the importance of the remuneration of women's work in the family and in the community and neighborhood. Albeit including a wide range of vol-

untary work, the core activities in the centers are paid (usually on an hourly basis). Mother Centers tend to generate about 20% of their operational costs through services provided. The remaining center expenses are funded through grants and/or regional and local government.

Children are a welcome and regular part of mother centers, they are, however, not the center of interest. Activities in the mother



centers evolve around the interests and needs of the mothers. This creates public space that is shared by adults and children and a different kind of childcare than in most childcare programs.

Who?

The 400 plus mother centers in Germany are coordinated regionally by mothers offices and platforms and nationally by the umbrella organization: National Association of German Mother Centers, that regularly conduct regional, national and international exchanges (i.e. a visit of Czech mother centers together with their local authorities to the mother centers in Baden Wuerttemberg), workshops and campaigns (i.e. the Local Agenda 21 and the Anti Poverty Campaign).

Internationally the National Association of German Mother Centers works in cooperation with two worldwide organizations of grassroots women's groups: Grassroots Organizations Operating Together in Sisterhood (GROOTS), and the Huairou Commission. The goal of these networks is

to further the international collaboration of community-based women, a process that began during the 1995 United Nations Conference on Women in China, continued during the 1996 Habitat II Conference on Human Settlements in Istanbul and has led to the Grassroots Women's International Academy (GWIA) during Expo 2000.

The National Association of German Mother Centers has been recognised as Best Practice by the Best Practice and Local Leadership Program of UNCHS. (United Nations Commission on Human Settlements).

What for?

The mother centers vision in the new millennium is to revive neighborhood networks and community life through innovative forms of living and working together in family-friendly work and neighborhood structures. In so doing, they serve as a model of alive and sustainable neighborhoods.

The mother centers self help peer group approach has proven to provide a school of life for the development of tolerance, conflict resolution, leadership and neighborhood support as well as for the development of economic skills.



Mother centers offer many seminal ideas for pressing challenges in today's society: Despite new levels of global connection, the human condition remains unchanged: at the grassroots level, a child needs sustained nurturance, relationship, a sense of meaning and a mother needs support in performing this daunting task which is often

not naturally available through family structures in contemporary society. Mother Centers are a very vivid example of what it needs to implement the "It takes a Village Concept" into neighborhood structures of industrialised societies.

Political Impact

All those dealing with the reproductive sides of life, with care-giving, are marginalised by the social structures of our society. They are outside of professional and labor market structures, which in current society are the predominant channels to social integration, power, status and political participation.

The dominant male culture of professionalism, full-time and non-stop labor market participation and the devotion of main resources to public life undermines the participation and leadership potential of women.

Women tend to be active and visible when politics connect to their private lives and to their neighborhoods and the community. Women involved in traditional male professional and political structures often seem to lose their connection to their female sources and networks and with that a lot of their potential and power.

The mother center movement challenges the exclusion of female values from public life.

The mother centers challenge the exclusion of children from public life, which is one of the factors contributing to the exclusion of women in public decision making.

Local Governance from the Bottom up

Mothers who deal with children on a daily basis learn much about what an environment must look like in order not to destroy the vitality, creativity, autonomy and confidence of children. Because of their daily experience with children they are well aware of the consequences of political decisions in fields like transport, architecture,

urban development and community infrastructure on the lives of children.

This competence and sensitivity to children's needs requires political channels in order to find consideration in society.

Mother centers provide such channels and spaces for new forms of lobbying and of creating political platforms for community women. In this way the expertise of those dealing with the concrete aspects of Without women politics misses the better half. everyday life in the communities is entered into local governance, an expertise, not

The local centers are involved in many aspects of local governance in their communities, ranging from municipal childcare programs, the design of playgrounds and safety in urban environments, municipal family and youth programs, to environmental health issues, the public transport system, housing and the development of residential areas.

The mother centers in Germany have become a player to reckon with in local politics.



based on professionalism, but on practical involvement in care-giving in the family and in the community.

Making this expertise visible, re-owning it collectively and re-integrating it into public life is the explicit agenda of the mother centers movement.

References:

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Photographs: Oskar Elssner, Stuttgart

Postcards: Scholz & Friends, Hamburg

FOR MAMA



Warning: This is about as much thanks as you're going to get.
Mothers in Germany can expect neither salary nor an adequate pension. (Figures based on federal laws.)
Politics aren't doing enough – we need more.
Help us make a change!

