

Monika Jaeckel

Mother Centers – An International Response to a Historic Need

Mother Centers were created simultaneously almost 30 years ago in Germany and in the USA, independently and without knowledge of each other. Somehow "it was in the air", we sometimes now speak about an archetype, which the Mother Centers represent.

The German model has since spread to many other countries leading to the formation of the Mother Center International Network for Empowerment: **mine** (www.mine.cc), which this paper presents.¹ Currently there are Mother Centers in 20 countries: in Albania, Argentina, Austria, Bosnia, Bulgaria, Canada, Cameroon, Czech Republic, Germany, Italy, Kenya, Lichtenstein, Nepal, Netherlands, Rwanda, Russia, Slovakia, Switzerland, Turkey and the USA. At the moment we count over 850 Mother Centers world-wide of which the bulk are situated in Europe.

Mother Centers have spread on their own as a bottom up grassroots movement via peer exchange and peer learning. How could this happen? What is behind this "spontaneous dissemination" process? We see Mother Centers as a historic answer to the breaking down of traditional family and community relations and networks, and the decrease of social cohesion and community in society, a process which is happening world wide, in very different cultural, economic, political, social and historical settings.

What are Mother Centers²

Mother Centers are local grassroots initiatives that run self-managed public spaces in the neighborhood, where mothers can focus on their needs and interests, exchange knowledge and experiences with peers, receive and generate mutual support in child-rearing tasks, engage in capacity building and further education, and initiate family support services like childcare, eldercare, healthcare, hot meals for children, laundry, janitor or other household services. The core of the centers is a daily drop-in coffee shop with childcare included. Activities include nursing groups, play groups, language and computer courses, courses on ecology in the household or on alternative health care, family support services like toy libraries, second hand stores, baby sitter service, family excursions and intergenerational festivities, as well as income generating activities like hairdressing, childcare, eldercare, or catering services.

Advocacy groups on issues like children's environmental diseases, single parenting or family friendly urban infrastructure are an important part of the self-organising that happens in Mother Centers. Mother Centers support the leadership potential of women in the communities and challenge the exclusion of children from public life, which is one of the major factors contributing to the exclusion of women in public decision making.

¹ The paper focuses on analyzing the reasons, the process as well as the impact of the international Mother Center movement based on results of an international study commissioned by the Bernard van Leer Foundation in 2006 as well as on Mother Center impact studies from Slovakia, Germany and the Czech Republic.

² This paper refers to the German Mother Center model, which is followed by most of the countries represented in **mine**. The Mother Centers in the USA follow a slightly different concept.

Mother Centers are a place where both issues and solutions can become visible, they are animated switchboards of information and exchange, a public living room. Everything that happens in the community can be discussed there on a daily basis. Anything that needs immediate attention or response can be attended to collectively.

Each center is uniquely defined by the skills, know how and ideas of the women involved. They create opportunities to earn supplemental income in „family friendly“ work roles that accommodate to individual family routines.

Children are a welcome and regular part of Mother Centers, and Mother Centers run many programs for children. They are, however, not the sole center of attention. Activities in the Mother Centers evolve around the interests and needs of the mothers as well. This creates public space that is shared by adults and children and a different kind of childcare than in usual childcare programs. Depending on their size and how long they have been operating, Mother Centers reach between 50 and 1500 families in the neighborhood.

In Mother Centers women are supported to join forces to improve the life of their families and communities, connect with families from different social and cultural backgrounds, claim public space and acknowledgment for their everyday life work and expertise, fight poverty and social exclusion and participate in local governance. For children the centers create an expansion of their social and physical space and experience. Space and funds for the centers are negotiated with local government or with foundations, or institutions like churches or the YWCA.

Mother Centers are a place where women own motherhood. Women today are confronted with strong contradictory ideologies in public culture. On the one side we have 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 side there is a public ideology portraying children as a burden and barrier for the self realization of women and personal freedom. Both ideologies escape 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.

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 voluntary 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.

How did Mother Centers originate and spread

Born out of research

Mother Centers were initiated in Germany out of academia by a research project that provided the initial spark and technical support needed to create a bottom up movement. The federal department for family policy commissioned a research project to answer the question why parent education programs were only reaching a very small segment of middle class families. In the research design the question was widened to: What do low income families themselves consider as support in their family situation with small children? This was in order not to presume what low income families themselves perceive as their priorities. Parents were not asked what they thought about parent education, or why they did not make use of parent education programs. They were asked to define out of their own perspective what they considered as most needed in their situation. Indeed parent education did not come up as a priority. What low income families perceived as supportive to their situation were things like meeting other parents (peer learning), having a place to go to in the company of their children, (claiming public space), being recognised as parents (everyday life experts), hands on support and relief in family tasks (close to home services), economic support (income generation and affordable prices), and being able to contribute their talents (resource based approach).

These elements were analysed and put together to create the Mother Center model, an innovative family policy program. The concept was explained to policy makers and funding to implement 3 model Mother Centers in Germany was negotiated. Grassroots initiators were recruited and coached to start up the first three Mother Centers.

In addition to putting together a scientific report and evaluation of the first 3 years the research team coached the women involved in setting up the first three model Mother Centers to reflect and write down their experiences. These reports were edited and compiled into a story book and a popular publisher was found to publish it under the title: "Mothers in the Center – Mother Center." The authentic grassroots voices in the book created a self help movement. The stories inspired mothers in other communities to set up their own Mother Centers. Common responses to the book were: "This is it!" and "We can do this too!" A movement was born.

Mothers were looking for recognition and acknowledgement in their taking responsibility for and everyday coping with parenting. They were looking for peer learning and peer support, they wanted to learn from each other. They did not want professionals to 'talk down' to them or put them into the role of pupils. Institutional settings that look like school and require disciplined time schedules proved not to fit family rhythms. Women wanted to have spaces where they could go with their children and not have to organize them away in order to participate in public life. And last but not least family budgets are often tight, women were looking for ways to supplement the family income in ways that are combinable with their family obligations.

The Mother Center concept resulted out of listening to mothers and putting together their views and visions into a concept and a model that created enabling conditions for self organisation and self help.

The Mother Centers spread from three model centers, sponsored for 3 years by the German Government Federal Family Department to a nation-wide and later international movement. This happened through the book in story telling format, through peer exchanges and study visits, many lectures, articles, start-up trainings and countless local negotiations with municipalities and

local authorities. Networking, regionally, nationally and internationally³ were crucial elements in this process.

Over time the success of the centers and their rapid replication, created a momentum towards public funding. This resulted in stimulating new legislation and new funding procedures, allowing for Mother Center funding titles in family and youth welfare programs. This was the result of extensive lobbying of the countless Mother Center initiatives across many countries in Europe. Meanwhile, preventive family policy measures that preserve healthy families and neighborhoods, are considered wise investments by many European welfare states.

Spreading like wildfire

Mother Centers have spread to 20 different countries with very different social and historical conditions.

In industrialized countries, the experience of motherhood is increasingly marginalized and often experienced as isolated and isolating. Young mothers often experience a process of loss of self-confidence when raising children, a task which demands different rhythms and priorities than those constituted by public norms and the labor market.

In Central and East European post-socialist countries many women find themselves at home with children, due to the increase of unemployment and the reduction of public childcare. In Central and Eastern Europe the role of civil society has been systematically dismantled and family and neighborhood networks destroyed during socialism. Many Central and East European countries are characterized by a disorientation of social roles and life patterns in regard to poverty, gender relations, and religious and ethnic traditions.

In post war countries like Bosnia Herzegovina the population has experienced severe personal and collective trauma, as well as a break down of family, kin and neighborhood networks due to massive dislocation .

When systems that previously safeguarded social integration and cohesion like full employment, or extended family and village networks break down, people need new spaces to meet, reorient themselves and reweave the torn social fabric.

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

Many projects contributing to the reconstruction of post-socialist societies focus on rebuilding political, infrastructural and economic institutions, which often are severely lacking. The Mother Centers focus on an aspect that has proved to be an equally important need in the region: the rebuilding of family, of neighbourhoods, of community.

After the socialist experience of state „collectivization“ of the task of raising children, many parents in post socialist countries take a keen interest in consciously taking charge of parenting themselves and in having a say in the way their children grow up in today's society. Mother Centers create possibilities for a wide range of peer learning, for parents to exchange views,

³ MC are a founding member of GROOTS (Grassroots Women Organising Together in Sisterhood), a network through which the idea spread outside of Europe.

experiences and information on parenting. They offer a platform for families to identify and voice their values and visions and to engage in active advocacy for family and community issues, so that these are not neglected in the process of new economics and new governance.

In Albania, Bulgaria, Bosnia and Slovakia Mother Centers are being created in the gypsy Roma communities as a way to activate women in the communities as well as a way to integrate Roma and non Roma families. The Mother Center approach is seen by Roma organisations as a way to activate Roma women to speak up on behalf of the community. They are also a way to bring a positive image of Roma into society, because not only Roma women participate and benefit from a Mother Center, the whole community and municipality participates and benefits.

In Canada the first Mother Center has been set up in Vancouver in the aboriginal urban community facing multiple challenges including marginalisation, poverty, family violence, prostitution and alcohol and drug addiction as well as long term welfare dependency. There are few preventive programs with this highly challenged group and those that do exist often deal with only one facet of the aboriginal community. The Aboriginal Mother Center Society sees the need for places where aboriginal mothers can gather without being stigmatized as clients of various social service agencies and where they can reflect on, recreate and strengthen their culture and traditions.

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

In developing countries like Kenya, Rwanda or Cameroon limited job opportunities, rising living costs, poverty and the rapid spreading of aids have placed an increasing burden on women and the family unit. More and more women are becoming single heads of households. Rural-urban migration, increasing violence, the eroding of community trust, and the breakdown of the traditional village and family social networks mean that there are fewer support systems in place to help women and their families to cope with the challenges of globalisation.

Mother Centers in developing countries provide a safe space for women and children. Support is provided to families, especially those whose children are malnourished, sick or orphaned. Childcare is offered as well as feeding programs for young children and collective income generating projects are developed.

In Nepal Mother Centers were seen as a good way to serve the group of internally displaced persons from Nepalese conflict regions as well as a way to give women more influence in shaping local communities.

In all these instances Mother Centers contribute to recreating and reweaving social integration and social inclusion and to strengthening the maternal voice and influence in society.

Creation of mine

The Mother Center International Network for Empowerment (**mine**) was founded in 2000 as an effort to link the experiences and concerns of the Mother Centers that are being initiated world wide. It is registered in Stuttgart, Germany.

A major obstacle to incorporating grassroots knowledge and experience into public decision making lies in the fact that these often stay local. Much of grassroots wisdom is held in places so disperse, it is difficult for others to access, thus entering the channels of public decision making very insufficiently. **mine** aims to translate the experiences of Mother Centers into policy making and advocacy.

Mine's mission is to contribute to a world in which civil society is active and the culture of care is reintegrated into public life, and in which grassroots knowledge is acknowledged, supported and influential. A world that places social cohesion and community at the base of development and in which societies are women and child friendly.

We envision a future where community and family values have been redefined and integrated into contemporary settings and contexts . We sometimes call this vision "mother centered development". To this end **mine** conducts international activities, conferences and campaigns, of which I want to give some examples:

Example 1: The **mine** Platform of Action.

This is an advocacy document which was adopted by representatives of Mother Centers and other mothers groups from 20 countries at the first international Mother Center conference in Bratislava in 2006⁴ and summarizes the issues and visions mothers around the world share and agree to join forces around.

Example 2: Mothers walk a mile.

Since several years the **mine** network takes to the streets internationally (with and without buggies) to create visibility for the concerns of mothers. This campaign has been joined by many countries. In the first years the campaign was called "Move the pram, move the world" and received the Guinness Record for pram pushing. It is growing steadily each year.

Example 3: How do we want to raise our children

The Slovak Mother Center network in cooperation with **mine** created the campaign: How do we want to raise our children? It was the first time Mother Centers and mothers groups from around the world created the opportunity to reflect on their own perspectives on parenting, and share their concerns as well as their solutions internationally and as such it marked a signpost of the global Mother Centers movement. Over 75 Mother Centers and mothers groups from 24 countries joined the campaign, representing more than 350 000 families worldwide.

The campaign was structured through a series of questionnaires administered to all participating groups who conducted dialog sessions on the various issues in their centers and posted their results on the **mine** website. The campaign highlighted in an international conference in Bratislava where the results were presented and collectively debated.⁵

⁴ International Mother Center Conference, Bratislava, Slovakia 2006, Platform of Action: www.mine.cc/mine.pdf

⁵ How do we want to raise our children? International Mother Center Conference Documentation, Bratislava, 2007

The MC Success Factors

The success of the Mother Centers on the ground is based on a set of principles that work together to create basic innovations and social change:

- Mother Centers are a grassroots self-help movement. The centers are self managed. Mothers are 'the experts' in the centers. Their everyday life experience is acknowledged as expertise. Professionals have a supportive role and engage in equitable partnerships.
- The approach of the centers is resource, not problem oriented. Women are not approached by asking them to define their problems. Instead they are asked to define what skills and resources they have to contribute to community building and community solutions.
- Mother Centers claim physical public space, 'a public room of our own' (slightly adapting the imagery of Virginia Woolfe). They are not harbored in rooms of other organisations for limited periods of time. The women dispose of and self manage the rooms full time. One of the crucial factors of the success of the Mother Center movement lies in this strategy of claiming public space for mothers and for mothering. Mother Centers create physical, emotional and mental spaces for women to join forces around shared experiences of motherhood and to critically analyze the structures that marginalise the voice and influence of mothers in society. They learn to use more social and public space both for themselves and for their children.
- Work in the Mother Centers is remunerated and it is spread among the participants. Voluntary work is additional, not a substitute for paid work. Usually for every paid hour in the centers one to three extra hours of voluntary work is generated.
- Children are welcome, but the focus is on the interests and needs of the mothers.
- Mother Centers function more family like than like institutions. The 'corporate culture' is personal and adapted to family rhythms. It follows women's ways of learning, and women's ways of doing things.
- Mother Centers function on the basis of collective leadership and a culture of leadership support. Learning to work together is a major focus. Conflicts are not avoided, constructive conflict solving is part of it.
- Mother Centers are melting pots in the community for women of diverse social, cultural, religious and ethnic backgrounds. Diversity is celebrated and integration and peace building methods are an integral part of the daily programs.
- The expertise of mothers of dealing with care work and the everyday life of communities is entered into advocacy, local governance and policy making.
- Mother Centers also claim reflective space. Peer learning exchanges as well as regular reflection seminars are part of the process. Extracting the lessons learned are an integral part of their functioning.
- Mother Centers provide a bridging function between the private and the public, between the informal and the formal. They recreate "the village it takes for raising children" and demonstrate contemporary forms of community parenting. Opening up nuclear family structures to local support networks in the neighborhood brings a shift towards more collective responsibility and organisation of reproductive tasks as well as a re-integration of care into public life.

- Mother Centers provide channels and spaces for new forms of advocacy. The expertise of those dealing with the concrete aspects of everyday life in the communities is entered into local governance, an expertise, not based on professionalism, but on practical involvement in care-giving in the family and in the community. The local centers are involved in many aspects of local governance in their communities, including municipal childcare programs, the design of playgrounds and safety in urban environments, municipal family and youth programs, activities to decrease violence, environmental health issues, the public transport system, housing, the development of residential areas, reforms in health care and in the conditions in hospitals, the povertization of families, as well as reforms in the system of education.

Impact

A series of evaluation studies conducted in Germany, the Czech Republic and Slovakia show some of the major effects of the Mother Centers on participants as well as on the community at large.

On the individual level benefits gained by participating in Mother Centers include more self confidence and vitality , increase in the domestic involvement and participation of fathers, support for the reconciliation of work and family life and support to find employment or create income generating activities. Skills and capacities gained include organising and negotiation skills, communication and relationship skills, improved stress resistance, capacity to work in teams, increased willingness to take responsibility as well as to develop tolerance and flexibility.

For children Mother Centers create the opportunity for children under kindergarten age to meet and interact.

On the social level Mother Centers bring marginalised and excluded groups into social participation, revitalize neighborhoods and local culture, generate innovations in professional and institutional programs, create a rich environment for informal learning, develop leadership potential in the community and are incubators for new ideas and local problem solving.

To quote some figures:

In a German study⁶:

- ✓ 80% of respondents feel that Mother Centers enrich the community
- ✓ 70% of participants state that they have learned more tolerance
- ✓ 67% affirm that their center has taken influence in the community by political actions
- ✓ 67% of fathers see Mother Centers as a positive influence on changing family roles
- ✓ 58% say they have learned to participate and raise their voices
- ✓ 55% answer that they have learned to cope with every day life with more calm and confidence
- ✓ 47% notice improvements in the conditions for families in their community
- ✓ 46% of the responding Mother Centers are represented in municipal councils and task forces
- ✓

⁶ Erler et al: Berlin 2001

In a Slovak impact study⁷

- ✓ 61% of participants observe positive changes in their child because of the MC visits. This includes characteristics like plays more easily with other children (76%), is more independent (73%), is more flexible (71%), more active and initiative (70%), more communicative (68%), more confident (68%), communicates with adults more easily (66%), has more social skills (65%), and is more self-secure and emotionally stronger (65%).
- ✓ More than three quarters of the respondents (77%) are sure that the MC is so unique for the child and the mother that it cannot be replaced by anything else.

The Mother Center movement has contributed to the transformation of social institutions and legislation. They have created an innovative shift in the field of social work and social welfare. A shift from mothers and families as clients of professional programs to self-help and empowerment as active participants in local planning and decision making,

The greatest success proved to be the rechanneling of resources, from social work programs to go directly into the hands of grassroots women's groups.

A major accomplishment of the Mothers Centers has been the allocation of public funds to support Mother Centers. This has often involved major innovation in legislation and funding regulations to remunerate and acknowledge the qualification of women's work outside of professional channels.

Motherhood Movement Issues

In would like to conclude this paper by highlighting some of the advocacy issues that the Mother Center movement has brought forward.

Marginalisation of care work

Motherhood in contemporary industrialised societies faces a fundamental structural double bind. While ideologically valued or sometimes over valued, the economic, social and political structures of society speak another language. As mothers women are marginalised and excluded from societies' channels of resource allocation, participation and decision making. The overall market orientation of contemporary societies exclude all those from mainstream society who are engaged in care work. Care is defined as "unproductive work". Those dealing with taking care of the needs of children, husbands, the frail, and the elderly are severely disadvantaged in their competing power in the labor market. They fall out of mainstream society and its decision making channels, are disadvantaged and excluded from public life. Women become second class citizens because they are the ones that predominately take over care giving responsibilities, which do not get public validation. Advocating for reentering the culture of care into public life is a major focus of the Mother Center movement.

⁷ Krajinka: Bratislava 2008

Mother and Child friendly environment

Urban environments have developed social structures which avoid encounters between adults and children other than in highly specialised children's services or inside the walls of the family home or car. It is becoming increasingly difficult for children to move on their own in public. Streets used to be one of the most important social places for children. Today this has been sacrificed to the priority of cars and traffic. From an early age on children learn that the omnipotent vehicle is more important than their natural and spontaneous desire to move. Children are taught on our streets that they are the weakest part of society. What kind of democratic message is that? They depend on their parents or caregivers, who control their mobility and they stand little chance of exploring the environment on their own. Mothers and children often experience a culture of hostility towards children in public environments. A society not welcoming and not incorporating children into public life has negative effects on their confidence, vitality and development as well as on the confidence of their care givers. An important focus of the Mother Center movement is the creation of child and mother friendly cities.

Mother Centers on every 4th street corner

Many social welfare programs are targeted at specific problem groups or problem areas. Mother Centers are defined as an integral part of family policy, as a basic support for all families in their child raising tasks. Just like parental leave and public child care programs in European welfare states support the upbringing of children and the creation of more of a balance between employment and family needs, there is a growing consciousness that families need community support on an everyday basis in their daunting task of raising children. Parenting in times where family units and patterns are changing needs peer support. Mother Centers create new forms of extended families, based on neighborhood networks and choice. They provide mutual support both in everyday life issues as well as in times of crisis. They generate both support as well as a kind of "community social control" that provides a basis to prevent problems from escalating or getting out of hand. Both in regard to the regular exchange and communication needs of young parents as well as in regard to crisis situations like violence in the community Mother Centers have a great potential. They provide a location for the evolution of community parenting, they give form to the concept of "It takes a village". The Mother Center movement therefore advocates for Mother Centers to be created "on every 4th street corner".

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