

## Interview with Monika Jaeckel for AWID

By Kristy Evans

Please explain some of the history behind your organization- when it was founded, in what context it came into creation etc.

The concept of Mother Centers was first established by the German Youth Institute (DJI) in the early eighties out of a research project that was conducted. The rationale of the DJI was that "it is cheaper and more far reaching to invest in preventive policies, than to pay the high costs when family socialization has already become dysfunctional". They felt that it is "more effective to support families to access their own assets and resources in order to help themselves and each other". In the pilot project, the German government funded the first three model Mother Centers. Following the pilot project the DJI ensured that the Mother Center concept was sustainable by "stimulating legislative reform to promote resourcing family self-help initiatives as part of local family welfare programs, soliciting funds from private foundations as well as governments, by advocating for the concept of self-help in parental education and by publishing research finds in accessible format written by women who participated in the first three model Mother Centers". This created a self help movement, women in other cities in Germany read the book and wanted this for themselves in their neighbourhood. Meanwhile the centers have spread world wide which created the need for an international network, MINE.

What are Mother Centers exactly?

Mother Centers are public spaces in neighborhoods where mothers and their children can go on a daily basis. Mothers can "relax, focus on their needs and interests, exchange knowledge and experience, receive personal support, take or give courses and training, as well as initiate projects and family services".

What is your vision of women's rights and gender equality? How does MINE's work contribute to this?

We are addressing the private part of women's lives, and seeing this as being the key to both their exclusion, as well as the key to their mobilization. It is about creating other conditions and validations for care work. The concept of equality has often been looked at as a strategy of competing with men on their terms- meaning excluding the whole issue of care work. The measuring stick usually being a male lifestyle and male model that excludes care work from their life and delegating it to others. We rather take women's lives as a measuring stick, to then see how the world needs to look at this type of work in order for it to be valued.

The basic issue is the marginalization of motherhood and the devaluation of care work in post-industrial societies- the whole split between public and private, this whole schism between productive and reproductive work and how the roles of care work and how the culture of care is actually split off from public life and public policy. This creates a schizophrenic situation in society generally, and for women especially, who become second class citizens because they are the ones that predominately take care of this part of life, which does not get public validation.

There is a very strong feeling of disempowerment that women have as mothers. In the Mother Centers they find public space and a public voice. They are able organise around practical issues like family-friendly infrastructure in the cities, issues of child care, of elder care, of how to balance out labor market involvement and family responsibilities, the whole issue of support services, how to create time and resources for parenting, recognition of what mothers do as

work, having a say and influence as mothers on the school system. Then of course, is the economic empowerment of mothers, because when you take care of a child you get into a situation which is often economically a disadvantage by many factors including your competitive power on the labor market.

We also look at issues such as conditions around birth giving. How are women treated when they give birth to children? How is this treated in the health system? Health of women and children, issues around raising a family, are very big practical issues where women have a lot to say on how things could improve in order to ensure that children have a higher quality lives.

All of these are issues that the Mothers Centers organize around.

MINE is linking the Mother Centers internationally because through the process of globalization, family, kin and neighborhood networks are being destroyed or drying up . In places like Bosnia it is the war that has completely destroyed any kind of social fabric in the society. Neighborhoods and family networks were just totally torn apart. All the former socialist countries like Hungary and Czech Republic were not allowed to have neighborhood networks during socialism. The HIV/AIDS epidemic has also broken down kin networks because the load of dealing with this in families has become too large of a burden. The families can't cope with it anymore. Rural/urban migration has also been destroying family and kin networks.

So basically what made society stick together on the level of care work and everyday life has been torn apart through all these factors and that is what Mother Centers actually aim to answer and address. Mother Centers create the means to recreate and reweave social networks in another way than the traditional family and kin networks.