

Mother Centers in the Czech Republic Case Study

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MOTHER CENTERS IN THE CZECH REPUBLIC - CASE STUDY

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I. History

The first Mother Center in the Czech Republic was founded in 1992 in Prague, after a Mother Center workshop was conducted by two German Mother Center activists in the fall of 1991. The workshop was sponsored by the German Heinrich Böll Foundation and planned by the "Prague Mothers" a group addressing environmental issues even before the fall of the iron curtain. The "Prague Mothers" focussed especially on the issue of air pollution, causing severe health problems for young children growing up in Prague. After the economic and political transition in the Czech Republic the group was also concerned with issues of strengthening family life and building a stable civil society in their country.

News about the model of Mother Centers from a Czech journalist living in Germany, proved inspirational for Prague mothers. They requested a workshop to be conducted for their members, other interested women from Prague and neighboring towns and villages. About 40 women attended the weekend workshop and the concept immediately struck home. It took the group about half a year to found the first Czech Mother Center in downtown Prague and soon other Mother Centers followed in other parts of the city and outskirts of Prague.

Since then Mother Centers have become a grassroots movement in the Czech Republic, spreading amazingly quickly throughout the country. Currently there are over 120 Mother Centers and Mother Center initiatives, both in urban and rural areas in the Czech Republic.

II. Background

For anyone familiar with the situation in post socialist countries this is truly amazing, because grassroots and self-help initiatives from the bottom up are very rare in post socialist societies due to the suppression of community organizing and weakening of civil society during the communist regime. On the other hand, the economic conditions in the Czech Republic are somewhat more favorable for such a development than other post-socialist countries. The rate of unemployment is lower, the housing situation better and the health care system more stable than for instance in Poland or countries of the former Soviet Union.

The majority of mothers in the Czech Republic make use of the parental leave scheme, provided for four years by the government, including a small monthly family payment. Many women make the conscious decision to stay at home on parental leave while the children are small. This is often a conscious choice as an alternative to the devaluation of the family under the communist regime and to the socialist uniform role model of full participation on the labor market for all.

Mother Centers are attractive to women in the Czech Republic for a variety of reasons:

- * After the "collectivized" experience of child rearing under communism, which in the Czech Republic was seen by the majority as an imposition, parents now consciously want to take charge of parenting themselves and influence the way their children grow up in today's society. Mother Centers create a possibility for peer learning, for parents to exchange views, experiences and information on parenting.
- * Mother Centers create a meeting point in the neighborhoods breaking through the often anonymous and isolating structures of residential areas in post socialist societies.
- * Mother Centers create an opportunity for children to meet and interact with other children.

- * Mother Centers are a switchboard for information, skills, support and resources for every day life and survival issues.
- * They create a structure and platform for families to identify and voice their problems and to engage in active advocacy for family and community issues, making sure that their interests are not neglected in the process of new economics and governance.

Activities in the centers include play groups, discussion groups, breast feeding groups, language courses, courses on ecology in the household and alternative health care, as well as family support services like a toy library, a second hand shop, family excursions etc.

Rooms for the centers are negotiated with local government, NGOs and other institutions like churches or the YWCA. Some funding is obtained from foundations like the "Foundation for the Development of Civil Society".

Mother Centers impact on many levels. They influence the quality of parenting and child socialization as well as the quality of family relations. They revitalize neighborhood and community networks as well as bringing a grassroots partner to local governance. They empower the women involved to take charge of their own lives as well as develop an arena for leadership skills to be discovered, developed and transferred to the community at large.

III. Values

Grassroots women's movements very often are driven by values and principles, that are at the core of women's activities and that stimulate and motivate their actions. In the interviews conducted for this case study it became evident that this is very true in the case of the Czech Mother Centers:

The daily events in the center and the family excursions on weekends and holidays have created a sense of community that means very much to me. I would have never thought that I would meet so many people who still have that capacity: to do something with and for others.

Before the Second World War mothers and families were respected. Communism destroyed much of that. In the centers the responsible work that mothers do is acknowledged and there is respect again for family values. We seek to apply these values, however, not only to the home, but also to public life, to make our communities and our society more child friendly.

After communism we were all very optimistic and hopeful towards a new society. A society of respect for the human being and where values had meaning again. Today however, we have begun to be more skeptical. Family values seem to be at the end of the hierarchy. Everybody seems to prefer money, careers, material goods. In the Mother Center we still can feel the confidence, that we want to teach our children to believe in higher goods than mere material gains and profit. That is what brings me here. Here we find community and sharing and my children learn what life is really about: to learn to care about others, to help each other and to live in peace and harmony with others. It is not enough to create a flourishing economic environment, although this helps with the changes, it is also necessary to develop a flourishing environment for the development of a caring society.

We place very high value on how to bring up our children. We want to create an alternative to the collectivization of child rearing in the former nurseries and kindergartens. We want to support parents in their responsibility for children, but we do not want to leave them alone. Mother Centers are just marvelous in this respect. Here parents are not deprived of their competencies as parents, but they are not left to themselves in their own 4 walls either. Something like a communal space is developing where we are learning to be responsible individuals as well as part of a community. This is what our society needs.

It is becoming apparent that there is a lot of economic criminality and corruption in our young democracy. Especially in high places, but also in the bureaucracy. This society needs to be held accountable. What we are learning in the Mother Centers is to be confident to hold up moral standards and to approach our politicians and hold them accountable.

IV. Process

Mother Centers in the Czech Republic developed and spread mainly by word of mouth. Radio programs and articles in major newspapers in the initial stages helped spread the news. Very instrumental in creating the Mother Center movement in the Czech Republic was the German Mother Center Handbook: "Mothers in the Center - Mothers Center." which the Prague Mothers translated into Czech and edited to apply to the Czech situation.

Following are a selection of stories on initiating Mother Centers in different communities:

I was visiting my child in the hospital who was ill and met other mothers there who were also looking after their sick children. One mother had heard about the Mother Centers in Prague. We discussed that it would be a wonderful idea to have such a Mother Center in our town. Over the weeks that our children were in the hospital we mothers became quite close. Actually a sort of little Mother Center had developed in that hospital room. When our children were discharged from the hospital we felt that we would miss our meetings so we decided to keep in contact and to try to initiate a Mother Center. Two of us made a trip to Prague and visited two Mother Centers there. When we came back we set to work to make it happen for us too.

Our local authorities were very supportive from the very start. We received rooms free of charge to start our center. And later we even received some funding. All in all now we receive 150 000 crowns a year from our municipality. Our activities are for children but also for the mothers. For instance we conduct computer courses for the mothers and offer parallel childcare. We offer swimming lessons for children and arts and crafts courses for the whole family.

I come from a small community with 3000 inhabitants. We had a kindergarten in our village with four departments. However after the fall of the socialist regime there was less demand for kindergarten places, because mothers preferred to stay at home with their children. So one of the departments was empty. We negotiated with the local authorities and were able to receive these rooms for our Mother Center. I had heard about Mother Centers from a radio program and had written to Prague and received the brochure about Mother Centers. When I realized that the rooms in the kindergarten were not being used I spoke to some of my friends about starting a Mother Center there, a place for mothers to meet with their children. Several of the mothers were interested, so we approached the council and received the rooms for our project. We pooled the ideas in our group and started several activities. One mother knows how to build toys for children and teaches that to the other mothers. Another mother was interested in baby massage and learned it

from a book and is applying it every week with a group of mothers. In our center we also have activities for the older children, for the kindergarten and school children from the childcare services in our building. They like to come to us to play. In the evenings we have programs for the whole family. Especially popular are our family parties.

We live in the outskirts of Prague. A friend came across the Prague Mother Center in the center of town on a shopping trip. She told us about it and we loved the idea of having something like that in our district. Very soon after, we noticed that one of the mobile bungalows that the construction workers use was vacated after ending major construction work in our neighborhood. We asked to find out if we could use this bungalow for a Mother Center and after several meetings back and forth we got it. That is where our Mother Center was initiated. One of the first things we started was a book library. Many mothers are very interested in reading about child rearing and child development, but books are very expensive. In our library books are donated and lent out free of charge.

Our Mother Center is in a rural area. One of the first activities we organised is a car pool service in the surrounding villages, so that women have a means of transport to the Mother Center. A woman in the area council had heard about Mother Centers and had suggested that the former "socialist culture center" be transformed into a meeting place for families. Mothers were asked what they would like to do there and almost immediately a group of mothers formed that focussed on discussing child rearing and health issues, like the right nutrition for children and other ways of keeping children healthy. Music courses and gymnastic courses for children followed and now our Mother Center is in full swing. We also have a clothes bazaar, where women can find cheap clothing for children.

I heard about Mother Centers from an article in the newspaper. I called the telephone number in Prague that was mentioned and was told that two other women from my town had also called to inquire about Mother Centers. I received the addresses of these other two women and we met in the home of one of them. We felt quite at ease with each other so we came together with some other friends and formed the Mother Center initiative. It took us however over a year before we managed to find rooms for a Mother Center. And we are still struggling to receive some funding. We have built quite a good information system in our center. Women fill out files if they can recommend doctors that are good or psychologists or physical therapy services they recommend. We have also put together a little flyer informing mothers on the social services they are entitled to and have compiled a sheet with the names of the people in the different municipal departments that are understanding, supporting and easy to talk to.

The Czech Mother Centers provide a nurturing and welcoming environment where women can meet, exchange information and practice and develop skills. The centers are places where their mothering concerns and experiences are validated. Leadership styles are open and non-hierarchical, contributing to the development of leadership skills on a self-selection basis. The women involved learn to find their own voices. Individual and collective knowledge and experience serve as catalyst for personal and social changes that benefit mothers and families.

While the initiators of the Mother Centers usually are women with a certain degree of education, the centers themselves are frequented by mothers from a wide range of social and economic backgrounds including single mothers as well as married mothers. The users represent a wide spectrum of contemporary Czech society.

The Czech Mother Centers have a stronger focus on activities with and for children than the German Mother Centers. Health issues, alternative health care methods like homeopathy, and ecology also play a bigger role in the daily activities, as environmental pressures are very strong in post socialist societies. The number of children with allergies and allergy related illnesses are dramatically high in these countries.

However, the Czech Mother Centers are increasingly developing programs that address the mothers themselves. In some centers partnerships have been developed with the local employment agencies to conduct labor market reintegration programs for the mothers.

The Mother Centers also have influence on the larger community. The self confidence gained by the development of knowledge and skills and the support they create for each other in the center spills into other areas of society like childcare institutions, schools or the health care system, where Mother Center women raise issues they are concerned with and negotiate changes and improvements. Women active in the Czech Mother Centers have also begun to engage in local politics and local governance.

Main obstacles involve the lack of access to resources. Despite their amazing success on the ground the Czech Mother Centers have not been able to access matching funds for their work. Rooms and minimal funding for expenses and equipment are the kind of resources they have managed to attain. The work in the centers itself however is largely not paid. In the transition societies of Central and Eastern Europe political focus is primarily on developing the economy and rarely are there budgets foreseen in the municipalities for social projects and self help initiatives. Access to funding from private donations and the private sector is impeded by the fact that legislation does not foresee tax benefits for donors.

The rapid spread of Mother Centers in the Czech Republic has led to the formation of a National Association of Czech Mother Centers with a Coordination Council to exchange information and create a mutual support system.

Articles in the newspapers or TV programs about Mother Centers keep inspiring new mothers. They turn to us calling for methodological guidance. When step by step new centers were founded, we knew it would be good to keep in contact with each other. So we started compiling a list of addresses. Each center is in some way unique and it faces different problems, but at the same time the centers are in many ways similar and they have problems in common. We have realized that it is the simplest to solve the common problems together and that the goal is easier to be reached through working together. That is why a task group of the Prague Mothers for the Mothers Centers was established that has now led to the formation of our National Association. We keep in touch by means of letters and by organizing thematic workshops, to spend time together in person and exchange experiences in detail. We also wanted to formulate common goals and to communicate them to the public. That is why, we organised the Congress of Mother Centers in the Czech Republic some years ago that was a huge success.

Our centers often start out quite successfully, but then get demotivated when they constantly hear from politicians that there are more important issues they need to deal with. I am often very impressed how much initiative and endurance is developed in the centers nonetheless. Some meet for months and years in cramped private quarters before they finally get access to rooms and most of the work in the centers is done on a voluntary basis. This would not be possible if we didn't have our mutual support system among the Mother Centers.

We organize workshops where the experiences are exchanged and motivation is built up. It is also important that we always develop new ideas to keep the women inspired. For instance the visit we organised to the German Mother Centers in Baden Württemberg. That was such an inspiring visit that we came back with new energy and a lot of new ideas. That really created a whole new momentum for our Czech movement.

Networking or federating the centers serves as a motivational tool for centers experiencing hardship. Successful centers can prove inspirational to start new work and explore new arenas for existing centers.

V. Impact

The Impact of the Mother Centers is described by the women involved on several levels. First is the level of empowerment and development of the women themselves. Support in conflict and crisis situations, development of personality and competencies, professional perspectives, more self-confidence, vitality and emancipation are dimensions gained. In interviews on the personal impact, qualities like improved stress resistance, capacity to work in teams, increased willingness to take responsibility, tolerance and expanded organizing, negotiation and communication skills were often described. For many, the Mother Centers proved to be an arena where women discovered skills and talents they were not aware of, which gave them increased confidence.

Mother Centers also have an impact on improving family relations, especially when the fathers take part in the family events in the evenings and on weekends. For many women, one of the main impacts of the Mother Center on their personal lives relates to strengthening their confidence as mothers. Many mentioned that they began their mothering career with fears and a loss of self-esteem. The center offered them a place to learn from other mothers, to express their inner fears and concerns, to get validation for the often, difficult adjustment to motherhood and receive support as a parent.

A psychotherapist referred her patient to our Mother Center. She was convinced that this was exactly the kind of climate her client needed to support her healing process. We often help women in severe situations, women who discover that they have cancer, or who are unemployed and need to find a job. The Mother Centers are often able to find flexible and unbureaucratic solutions and support systems. In our center there are many women who need to live from welfare. I often think that without the supportive environment of the center they would have fallen through the social fabric.

In many centers a lot of informal peer counseling, supporting each other with everyday issues like babysitting or in times of crisis and referring to professional services and support systems where needed takes place.

In the Czech Republic there is poverty. Families are not confronted with starvation, but many are poor and have difficulties making ends meet. An important function of the center I have seen is a kind of role modeling how to live a simple life and not create debts. Families are confronted with an enormous amount of consumer products that was unknown formerly. In the center we need to manage with very little funds and still we create a warm and stimulating climate. We often talk about this, that it is important not to succumb to the pressures of having to buy everything that it is now possible to acquire. We show how to live a good life on a simple level, even without all the modern, expensive new gadgets.

The centers provide an alternative way of living where women role model how to survive with very little means, not get swept away by a consumer culture and over burdened with debt. It is possibly one of the few institutions, which provide a different message than the consumerist one of the media and corporate worlds.

We often fly kites with the children in the park. Many other children and families from the neighborhood usually join us when we do this. We have also reintroduced the traditional lantern parade that used to be part of our Czech tradition. When we go down the streets with the children and the lanterns many stop and say, how wonderful that this tradition has come back. We also have special events where we invite the neighbors, like a flea market or theatre plays or seasonal celebrations. These are usually very popular. Often neighbors come in and ask us when we are having an event like that again. In this way we are creating a sort of community in our neighborhood.

The centers have thus impacted the neighborhoods. Activities involving the neighborhoods like reintroducing traditions, festivities and celebrations that were neglected and devalued in the former regime are now revived. Neighborhood relations are still slow to develop and the centers are a catalyst for creating community contacts and networks. Creating relationships in the neighborhood as a way of building social capital counters the individualization tendencies that come with the introduction of the free market.

The Czech centers have an impact on public life and public opinion. They not only have quite a public profile in their respective communities but also in the media including TV shows where they are often invited to debate on different issues concerning children and families, environmental and ecological issues.

Women reported using the communication and negotiation skills developed through the Mother Centers in other areas like schools or hospitals. Having their thoughts and ideas considered and listened to in the centers, gives mothers confidence in their own judgements and opinions. They begin to take themselves and their right to impact on issues that affect them, their children, families and their community more seriously. They learn to stand up for their interests and concerns in new ways they would not have previously envisioned.

We became active in our local hospital, challenging the notion that there is only one right posture for giving birth. Now women have more choices concerning childbirth. We also have made it possible for women to stay overnight with their children, who are in hospital. This was the result of discussions we had in a group on women and health in our center.

Mother Center women have run for parent councils in kindergartens and schools, supported election campaigns and also run for city council seats themselves. The Mother Centers are increasingly acknowledged as an important part of the evolving civil society in the Czech Republic and are seen as grassroots partners for local government.

I think it is an important success that the authorities are becoming aware that we are contributing an important part to society. That through the Mother Centers many health issues are dealt with on a preventive level, before they become an issue for our health care system. Our goal is to be acknowledged in our role as part of the civil society,

contributing solutions to problems of society. That the role of civil society in this respect is made aware to the government as well as to the general public.

One of the parties running for the last elections actually mentioned it explicitly in their program that they were willing to support the Mother Centers as an important part of the development of a civil society. This we consider a success of our work.

Slowly but surely institutional structures such as parties and local government are starting to recognize and validate the contributions of the Mothers centers, in problem solving, awareness generation and creating far sighted solutions.

VI. Relearning and Engendering Democracy and Local Governance

A major concern of the women from the Czech Mother Centers revolved around the importance of Mother Centers for the process of relearning democracy in their country.

Before the war there was a flourishing culture of free associations and clubs in the Czechoslovak Republic, among them for instance the "Czech Women's Club" founded at the beginning of the century, that built a house to provide space for a broad spectrum of women's organizations and activities. Then came the 2nd World War followed by forty years of communist regime forbidding any free associations. We were brought up to passivity and blind obedience. People were punished for publicly expressing any opinion opposing the party ideology.

Becoming aware and taking pride in the history of their own civil society institutions prior to communism is one important part of awareness generation in the Mother Centers. Furthermore, surfacing women's agency historically allows mothers to claim their space in public life outside the umbrella of just feminism.

Ten years ago we regained our freedom and are learning to live in conditions of democracy. The process of establishing the Mother Centers in our country is a unique opportunity how to learn the ways of free citizens, learning to solve their own situation and discovering the problems of life in a community. It is remarkable that it is mothers with small children who are willing to participate in both, their own and community change. This enables children too to participate in the activities of the center and learn in a natural way to participate in the formation of the civil society.

Learning to take responsibility and leadership in the center and consecutively also for one's own life is a process many women expressed as a very important part of their Mother Center experience.

That the Mother Center was not a service provided and I the consumer was astonishing to me when I first started coming to the center. That we were actually invited and expected to participate in the running of the center was a real challenge. I realized how much I had expected everything to already be settled and that nothing could be changed. I also noticed reluctance coming from my unwillingness to be a member of any organization, which I carry from the times of totalitarian society when membership in various unions and parties was imposed on us as a means for education, career and not sticking out. I needed to learn how to participate, how to be active in the center. I feared not to

contradict someone else's competencies. It worked best when the initiators of the center were not around and there was no one else at hand to answer questions, respond to requests, pass information on and make decisions. Gradually we learned that work can be divided, that everyone can take a little bit of the responsibility for running the center and that every contribution is important. We learned to cooperate with each other and to respect each other's contributions. We learned not to expect everything from a leader and authority figure, but that we were like an organism, all taking important roles. The head cannot move without the neck.

In the center I learned to be more confident that I can influence the way things go in my life and that I can stand up for my interests when things are wrong. It started with the experience that I was able to play with my kids in a group in the center much better than alone at home. Being in a group of mothers gave me confidence. When we managed to organize family vacations at the ocean for a whole group of parents with small children, that was like a break through. Being with small children in the public and standing up for their needs in trains and restaurants was a very deep experience for me. Now I am able to ask questions in the school or at the doctor when I don't understand what is going on or when I think the children should be treated differently. Formerly teachers or doctors were all authorities that I deferred to, never questioning or opposing them openly.

Another aspect of democracy that the Mother Centers teaches is tolerance and cooperation. The social as well as intellectual composition of the centers is often very colorful and interests, ideas and expectations can vary considerably.

We had to talk a lot with each other and learn to negotiate just to come to agreements on questions of aesthetics, which colors to use and which furniture to put into the center. There was an amazing amount of learning involved in this. We learned that we needed to take the time to have open talks and exchange of opinions, we learned that it is important to show ourselves and not hide behind smiling faces. The way we learned to deal with our differences and conflicts not relying on directives from any higher authority can really be described as a daily school of democracy. And this applies to the children as well.

To be assertive and make ones own way has become a buzz word in our society today. But what does it really mean, freedom? It is not the freedom to do anything you want. It is to learn to make decisions for yourself and take responsibility for your life but also to learn to live together with others and to take responsibility for the whole. In the centers we learn both. I realized I was not used to speak directly and not behind other peoples backs, and that it was important both to take responsibility for my own opinion as well as to listen to those of the others.

When we were having a problem in our community concerning dog litter, we discussed in our center what to do. The children were confronted with dog litter in the playgrounds in the neighborhood, especially in the sandboxes. We did not know where to start to change this. In the center we formed a group and informed ourselves which department was to be approached with this issue. But that was not the end of it. We could not just voice our concern there and have it taken care of. A whole process of debate started, where the dog owners also had meetings and voiced their concerns. In the end we found a very good solution, the litter boxes that are now also accepted by the dog owners. Without the Mother Centers we probably would not have had the confidence to see this whole process through, it was a very important learning process for us, we learned that it is possible to find solutions that are accepted by all.

The more we develop our community in our Mother Center the more I have become sensitive to issues in the larger community. For instance in our street we have the problem that the parking lots are often occupied by big cadillacs that do not have the right to park there. We have a system of resident parking in our district. No policeman ever does anything about these cars that I am sure do not belong here. I think it is some kind of Mafia doing some kind of business. I presume that the police has been bribed. This is not democracy. I very much wish that our society really chose democracy. That we do not get used to such forms of corruption. We have filed a complaint to our local police. It is important that they realize that citizens are aware of what is going on and that they will not be passive on-lookers.

An important part of learning democracy is seen by the women in learning to get involved in issues of the community and learning to deal with local authorities. The gap between citizens and their representatives in local and national government is felt to be still rather deep in the Czech Republic, due to their recent history. Many public authorities and representatives in city councils do not have a concept of being accessible to citizens or dealing with them as partners. Many citizens have deep-rooted experiences with a repressive and arrogant bureaucracy and feel intimidated and reluctant to approach them. The first step in dealing with this situation is the founding of the Mother Center itself. Registering as an association, negotiating for rooms and funds are arenas where both Mother Center initiators as well as local authorities gather valuable experiences.

We had no idea what procedures were needed to found a Mother Center. Fortunately we could ask the women in Prague and they had put together a sheet explaining the steps. This was all new to us and we learned from scratch what the procedures are to form an association and what the rights and rules are. This was like learning democracy in practice. We learned that it is much more than just going to vote at election time.

It was new for me as representative of the local government to be approached by citizens for a self help project. We were all used to a top down state and to receiving directives. There was no communication or cooperation between the local authorities and the citizens. This is something we need to learn on both sides. We want to have a new form of governance to be supportive of the development of a civil society, but we are all new in this role. I think it is easier on the local level, that is where real cooperation can begin. As such the Mother Centers have been an important initiative in our community. We have learned to see and understand the importance of initiatives like this, that many problems can be addressed and solved by citizens themselves and not all has to be taken care of by public services and departments. When the Mother Centers asked for rooms they argued that they were making an important contribution to the community on a self help and preventive level and that they should therefore be entitled to free rooms just as we as local authorities are entitled to rooms. That was a surprising view indeed, but over time we learned to understand the logic in it, and that it is indeed our role to support citizens initiatives.

The Mother Centers provide a way by which citizens can now negotiate with local government. It further helps re-educate local authorities on the usefulness of such participation, and provides an effective alternative to top-down bureaucratic strategies.

VII. Partnerships

Over the years the Czech Mother Centers have become involved in many negotiations and cooperation with local government and government agencies and in many communities are considered a valuable grassroots partner for issues concerning families and the community.

Sustainable partnerships have been built at the national level with the Ministry for Social Affairs, the Foreign Ministry, the Ministry of Internal Affairs, the Ministry of Agriculture, the Department of Human Rights and Gender Equality as well as with parliamentarians from different parties, including the vice president of the Czech parliament. The Central Government Office has drafted a letter of recommendation that is sent around to municipalities, recommending Mother Centers to local authorities.

Fruitful partnerships have especially evolved at municipal level, where the Mother Centers are seen as an important link to the community and are invited to take part in various debates, conferences, round tables and consultation processes on a wide range of issues including the role of the family in a civil society, reform of the school system as well as the prevention of criminality.

One representative of a Czech municipality put it this way:

Public authorities are slowly realizing what a positive thing it is, when citizens become active, and are beginning to support grassroots groups. Municipal politics and local governance does not end with building a strong economy or impressive buildings. It is about people. The quality of people and people relations in a city contributes a great deal to the development of the municipality. Places are needed where friendly relationships can be formed and where families with problems and minorities can be integrated. The Mother Centers are such places. They increase not only the quality of families but also the quality of neighborhoods in the community, they contribute to a higher birth rate and therefore to the future of all of us. They are a model showing that self-help works.

Although the Mother Centers have developed many positive partnerships with political departments and agencies, they still see the need for a lot of convincing and lobbying, in the area of funding and legislative issues. These include reforming the parental leave legislation, which to date makes cuts in the monthly family allowances if the children attend any form of public childcare and the necessity for new legislation to allow donations to be tax deductible. Most centers are very active on these and other issues, organizing petitions, inducing public debates, writing articles in the media etc. In some cases women from the Mother Centers have been candidates and elected for the municipal council, in order to have more say.

Partnerships have also been developed with other players in society. Pediatricians, psychologists and family counselors often cooperate with the centers.

- The center is seen by cooperative professionals as a major support system to reintegrate clients into the community.
- For the women in the Mother Centers it is seen as support that they can refer women with severe problems for professional help.
- A children's home refers parents applying for adoption to the local Mother Center as a support system in their transition process of becoming a family.
- The local university asks the Mother Center women to review and comment on papers and projects undertaken by their students on family issues.

Several positive partners have been formed with foundations and NGOs that help to access funds and resources. The Heinrich Böll Foundation, the Goethe Institute, the Foundation for the Development of Civil Society, and the YMCA have proved to be reliable partners for the Czech Mother Centers.

Partnerships with the local unemployment departments have been quite successful in helping Mother Center women find jobs as well as cooperating in education and retraining programs. In some cases the unemployment department has funded jobs in the Mother Centers.

Private sector partners are rare and as yet on a small scale. Some hotels have allowed Mother Centers to use their fax facilities, and some companies like Johnson and Johnson have made donations of their products to the Mother Centers.

Negative partnerships, however, were also reported. Companies tend to see more benefit in sponsoring big sport events than social initiatives like the Mother Centers, the publicity and advertisement effect is seen to be larger.

In some cases there were negative experiences with local institutions like kindergartens and family-counseling centers who saw the Mother Centers as competition and felt threatened in their professional role by the Mother Centers.

Funding regulations of foundations and donor institutions were often seen as too complicated and not compatible with the needs and requirements of the Mother Center project.

It is rather easy to get start-up support, toys, furniture and other equipment. But that is only necessary once. We need to pay our rent on a long-term basis. Receiving funds for only one year can help to get started, but funders must realize that a project like Mother Centers needs long term support. We do raise our own funds by some of our services, like the midday meals, the babysitting service, or the flea markets and street parties we organize, but this can never be enough to run the center on a continuous basis. The conditions are often so complicated and require so much paper work. Nobody seems to be willing to pay for the work that happens in the centers. This leads to very strenuous procedures to receive little pots of funds here and there that we often use for other things than we write in our application. It is a tiring process and often not worth it at the end of the day.

A strong partnership that continues to bring support and inspiration is the partnership and exchange with the German Mother Centers, the latest highlight being the visit to the Mother Centers in the area of Stuttgart, where a group representing 14 Czech Mother Centers and 6 departments of the local and national Czech government were hosted by their counterparts in the German region of Baden Württemberg. This visit included round table conversations with the German Mother Centers and their funders from local and regional government as well as foundations and sponsors from the private sector, addressing issues of political support from local administration, of funding, resources and rooms and explaining why the German funders sponsor and support the Mother Centers and what political programs they make use of in order to do so.

The visit with our politicians to Germany was a very important success in our work. It helped us to persuade our politicians and bureaucrats on all levels of the Mother Center concept and gained us a lot of political support. It was such a new experience, to go on a study trip together. It was a wonderful opportunity to see and understand each others view points. The questions and reactions to the different examples in Germany we were presented with varied sometimes a great deal between us unequal partners, the

government representatives and the representatives from the Mother Centers. The debates we had not only in the official meetings, but also in the bus home and afterwards in our respective communities were very enriched by this experience.

Peer learning needs to happen at all levels. Exchanges between the mothers are important. However equally important are peer exchanges among officials as a means of educating local government.

VIII. From Local to Global

Ever since the beginning, we have been inspired by our German sisters with whom we keep in personal touch. We have had different forms of exchanges, groups from the German Mother Centers have come here and we have visited centers in Germany. There is especially a lot of contact with the centers near the German-Czech boarder. Next year Czech and German centers are planning a "festival without boarders", a regional arts and crafts festival for the communities on both sides.

Learning across national borders and seeing the common problems women face, allows women from the Czech republic to experience solidarity with the international women's movement. It helps them add their voices to this larger voice and thereby helps them take their rightful place at the table for global negotiations and decision making rather than let other women speak for them.

Without our German sisters we would not have had the chance to join international grassroots networks and to have contact with women's groups from around the world. This we find, however, very important, because it creates challenges, by which we learn. To explain our concerns, lessons and successes to others has made us much more aware of them ourselves. It has also helped our standing and status in our own country. We have now been invited to join the National Habitat Committee, we are seen as part of a larger movement.

The experience we have made in our exchanges with the German Mother Centers is that despite the differences between our two countries we have very much in common. Our debates and processes in the centers are very similar. The situation of mothers in industrialized societies seems to be very much the same, independent of social, economic, national and cultural differences. This gives a lot of strength and confidence that we are facing real issues in our societies, that we are not alone and that we have important voices to raise.