

MOTHERS MAKE DEMOCRACY

By Sheryl Feldman

"Bosnia-Herzegovina is post-conflict and post-socialist," explained Mirella Mulalic Handan of Sarajevo. „Well-intended agencies send in people to teach the locals democratization."

Ms. Handan, who calls herself "a mother, a wife, a professional and a political dealer" speaks of the arriving experts with a small smile of irony. "These programs all want to achieve what our Mother Center is already doing," she says, referring to her neighborhood group. The outside experts want us to have community organization. Mother Centers do this. They want inter-ethnic organization. We have that. They want citizens to develop capacity. Mother Centers do this. They want women to participate in local decision-making. Mother Centers do this."

Ms. Handan spoke at the weeklong Grassroots International Academy (GWIA) which is being held at United Nations headquarters in New York, partly in preparation for next week's UN General Assembly Special Session on Habitat. GWIA, a new international model of peer teaching and learning, brings grassroots women organizers from all over the world to exchange practices, create new development practices and sharpen political strategies.

Created in the 80s in Germany, the Mother Center idea is simple. Mothers establish a public space, or "public living room" where they come together to discuss common problems, share experience, teach skills and learn new ones - including those of democratization.

As they develop the Center, women's sense of social isolation decreases and, with it, their feelings of worthlessness and helplessness. They begin to recognize the value of their work as mothers.

And that's when the internal democracy of the Mother Center starts spreading out into the community. Maybe the women want safer street crossings for their children, or - commonly - a park where they can take their children. They begin to visit municipal officials, emphatically taking their children with them.

In Eastern Europe, that step is a dramatic one. Rut Kolinska, who founded the Mother Center movement in the Czech Republic 9 years ago, says that women in the soviet era expected government to solve all problems. Today, in the Mother Centers they are learning "how to go to the municipality and demand what they need."

The value of the skill is magnified in a place like Bosnia-Herzegovina, where war has decimated families and 80% of returning refugees are single women and children.



Over time, the impact of the mother's participation in municipal life grows. In Germany, where the movement is well-established, mothers with expertise in the knowledge of what they call "everyday life" make themselves integral to planning processes. In Stuttgart, the women were key participants in the design and development of the city's twenty million mark intergenerational center.

Gradually, the women change political culture. Ingrid Bregenzer, founder of the Salem, Germany Mother Center, started taking her children to the municipal offices and public meetings ten years ago. Originally resistant to the idea of children in public buildings, the Mayor took to hiding chocolates in his cupboard for Ms. Bregenzer's daughter. And that was before Ms. Bregenzer took democracy even further and won a seat on the city council.

The ground-up democracy of the Mother Center model has appeal to women in many cultures. Today there are about 750 Centers, the majority of which are in Germany, Eastern and Central Europe. Last year, one opened in the slums of Nairobi in Kenya. Aboriginal women in British Columbia are currently organizing another.

Women from over 15 countries and even more organizations -- some of them with well over a million members--are participating in this week's GWIA. They will teach or learn from presentations on peer education, security of tenure, post disaster and post conflict empowerment and development and safety in cities. GWIA is sponsored in part by the Huairou Commission, an international network of grassroots women's organizations.

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