

## **MOTHERS AS MOVERS AND SHAKERS**

### The Network of Mother Centers in the Czech Republic

What began in 1992 with a small group of mothers trying to counter their isolation as parents and find ways to cooperatively care for their children outside their own homes, is today a sophisticated civil society movement of women who are demonstrating through their own efforts and experience, how 'the personal is political.' In the last fifteen years, these women have gone from creating one mother center in Prague; to organizing and managing over 250 mother centers -that meet the practical needs of families with young children; to federating a country-wide network of women who work collectively on a broader set of values and goals that demonstrate why and how Czech society must become 'family friendly'. This strategic vision, today positions the Network of Mother Centers in the Czech Republic in an advisory role to the national Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs, in European Union debates on equal opportunity programs on inclusive, 'family friendly' social policy. The Czech Mother Centers are also recognized by cooperative networks of grassroots women's groups as an innovative women's empowerment organization, from whom other grassroots groups with similar objectives have much to learn.

### **HOW THEY BEGAN**

The story of the Czech Mothers has its roots in the Prague Mothers Group, a small informal, underground organization of 20 mothers, whose main concern was the poor air quality in Prague and how this was affecting the health of children growing up in the city. Because of restrictions around public meetings during the communist era it was not easy to meet or expand the number of women. In spite of this, the Prague Mothers would meet, try to reach out to other mothers, discuss problems and write letters to the Government. Following the Velvet Revolution the Prague Mothers, began organizing more openly, but were unsure of the direction the organization should take until they met Alena Wagnerova. A Czech woman who had lived in Germany, Alena persuaded three leaders of the Prague mothers to visit the German Mother Centers in 1991 to explore this grassroots organizing approach.

#### ***Learning From the German Mother Centers***

During this 1991 exchange visit with the German Youth Institute (DJI) and five Mother Centers in Munich, the Prague leaders learned that a DJI research project focusing on the conditions of parenting in contemporary societies had revealed that large numbers of German mothers caring for young children at home reported a strong sense of social isolation, loss of self confidence, and erosion of their professional/economic skills. In response, DJI persuaded the German Federal Government's Department of Family Affairs to fund a pilot program that supported mothers of young children to establish 3

public, community based 'mother centers' where they could collectively work out ways to look after their children and develop themselves. A book documenting their experiences, strategies and lessons that offered mothers of young children a simple concept, some practical ideas of how to organize themselves and led to a self-help movement of more than 400 centers in Germany emerged quickly. And in a short time, through peer learning and peer exchange spread to neighboring countries in Europe (UNHABITAT 2002).

The Prague Mothers saw in their tour that the Mother Centers in Germany were 'public living rooms' managed through self-help efforts of women living in the community. They saw how mothers, not professionals (social workers, teachers etc.) were in charge and so each center was unique –reflecting the needs, talents, interests and capacities of the local women who ran them. Some centers offered sewing classes and repair services as ways of lowering household expenses and supplementing incomes; others organized activities such as had parenting skills training, counseling support and holistic health.

## INITIATING AND SCALING-UP MOTHER CENTERS

Inspired by the German Mother Centers, the Prague Mothers found a room in the YMCA in Prague in which they started their first Mother Center in 1992. This became a social space for women allowing them to collectively fulfill their caregiving roles. Women were drawn to this public space organized by mothers in whom groups of women and children could both spend time together.

Klara Rulikova one of the founding leaders of the Mother Center remembers, *"For me the Mother Center was somewhere I could take my children and meet other mothers and their children... I visited the center once or twice in a week. It was the only place where I felt welcome... As Prague Mothers we had always met on the street ...With the mother center, we did not think about how we were trying to change society, it was simply about being together with others like myself."*

Women were eager to share their experience with other mothers and to increase the number of centers. The Czech women had seen in Germany that the Mothers Centers had a window that looked onto the street. Similarly the first Mother Center in Prague also had a window that looked onto the street. People passing by could look in. "When they looked in they saw something they had never seen before: a gathering place for women in a public place," says Rut Kolinska, leader and founder of the Czech Mother Centers. **Women** began to use posters, pamphlets and letters to publicize their work. They also translated and adapted the Handbook of the German Mother Centers to disseminate the idea. From the letters of inquiry they received, mothers would gather the addresses of women and organize workshops for these women to learn how to start their own centers. Then newspaper articles with Rut Kolinska's address listed led many mothers to her living room to learn about how to set up their own centers.

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Monika Jaeckel has documented numerous accounts of how women across the country learned about the Mother Centers through other women while shopping or visiting hospitals, through posters, radio programs and were inspired to identify spaces, negotiate with local authorities or businesses to create similar centers in their own communities. (See MINE, 2006). One such a account is given below:

*“I come from a small community with 3000 inhabitants. ...I had heard about the Mother Centers from a radio program and had written to Prague and received the brochure about Mother Centers... When I realized that these 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 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 other mothers, another mother was interested in baby massage and learned from a book and is applying it every week with a group of mothers. In our centers we also have activities s 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.”*

During this initial phase of expansion a key event in the development of the Czech Mother Centers was their participation in the German Mother Centers' two Congresses in 1993 and 1996 - where the entire network of German mothers would come together to celebrate their accomplishments, reaffirm their goals and plan for the future. These events highlighted the importance of having a consolidated formal network with a common vision and the importance of having the support of local and national government (Kolinska, 2006).

In 1997 the Czech Mothers organized their first Congress, which was attended by 27 mother centers. At the time, for most women the mother centers simply served the practical needs of mothers. The strategic or empowerment objectives of the mother centers were yet to surface. The Congress “showed mothers that each of us has our own value, but together we are very strong...it helped mothers from the different centers to see their own value and how the idea had spread,” recalls Klara Rulikova.

Ironically, it was the absence of the German Chair of the German Federal Parliament Rita Süßmuth who had initially accepted the invitation to attend the Congress that led to a barrage of media coverage on the Mother Centers...In the period that followed there were several articles in the newspapers along with radio and television programs that publicized the work of the Czech mothers.

## CENTERS OF EMPOWERMENT AND CHANGE

By bringing childcare and mothering into the public arena the mother centers were on the one hand making visible ways in which existing policies and practices leave mothers socially and economically marginalized; and on the other hand by creating platforms enabling 'ordinary' women to participate in public decision making, were empowering women to act as citizens and agents of change.

Over the next few years, a loose network of mother centers. The network created a common platform for women across villages, towns and cities to support, mentor, and teach one another how to run centers. The empowerment of women in these centers came from the common experiences of women initiating and managing the centers and mothers' voicing concerns which resonated with mothers across the country. Mothers began by locating other likeminded women, then these women would identify and claim public spaces. (These spaces were rooms in municipal buildings, unused kindergartens, offices of construction contractors) where they could run their centers. Women would also mobilize the expertise of mothers in the community to organize activities for both women and children, Women also had to devise a combination of fundraising strategies to finance the management of the centers. Sometimes municipalities would provide the space or rent it for the centers, parents would pay a small fee for attending classes run by the center. As the individual centers evolved in parallel to the network's growth, mothers began to draw attention to the need for community improvements such as public parks, playgrounds and cultural centers; women began to voice the ways in which infrastructure development, social policies and employment policies needed to support women to balance parenting with women's employment or career aspirations. Several mother center leaders became active in municipal planning processes within which they would lobby the Government to create child-friendly public facilities, policies and working conditions

The emerging self-confidence and empowerment fostered by the Mother Centers was evident in the ability of women to voice ways in which women and children experienced cities and public services and how their collective efforts were changing this. (MINE, 2006).

*One mother said, "As a mother you fall out of networks of your former friends who don't have children. Society isn't enthusiastic about having children around. You are expected to keep them out of everyone's way, to discipline them so that they don't break or dirty any property. I don't like having to be the enemy of my child so that it doesn't get on anyone's nerves Sometimes I defend my kids against hostile environments but I don't always have the energy, The mother center gives me a lot of self-confidence in this respect."*

*Another said, " the other day a bus driver didn't want to take us. We were a group of ten others and about twice the number of children, trying to get on the bus, He sure got his*

*lesson of the day, we were very articulate. In the end he was really very patient and kind to the children.”*

*Yet another said, “... the more mothers have been involved in the childcare programs of the center, the more the general atmosphere has become calm and patient towards children.”*

## **LOCAL TO LOCAL DIALOGUE: COLLABORATION WITH LOCAL AUTHORITIES <sup>1</sup>**

The initiating of centers and claiming of space frequently involved educating and gaining the support of local authorities. As the individual centers and the network evolved women’s need to partner with local government grew as they pressed for child-friendly infrastructure, safe neighborhoods for families and participation in local planning processes.

In 2001, the Czech Mothers were one of six women’s empowerment organizations to participate in the Local to Local Dialogue a global project developed by the Huairou Commission<sup>2</sup>, in response to the needs of grassroots groups to organize themselves and advance their priorities through dialogues with local government. The Czech Mothers used this opportunity to initiate and document the process by which the women in a small town called Breznice organized mothers and mobilized the support of schools and local corporations to partner with the municipality to get a playground for their children. By carefully documenting and disseminating the strategies used by the Breznice women, the Czech Mothers used the L-L Dialogues to get women to analyze, sharpen and transfer their strategies for collaborations with municipalities within their national network as well as in the global network of GROOTS International and the Huairou Commission.

The Mother Centers have continued to organize Local to Local Dialogues in several other cities and are currently in their fourth year of organizing such Dialogues. The Czech Mothers have also taken these Dialogues to the next level by organizing a series of regional Roundtable Dialogues - a step by step engagement strategy for creating more equality and mutual respect between mother center representatives and public officials as they plan and collaboratively implement ‘family friendly’ public planning and service programs (Schilen, 2007)

The Local to Local Dialogues and the Roundtable Dialogues demonstrated to women themselves as well as government and municipalities, how women are not just

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<sup>1</sup> See “A Playground for Breznice’ in UNHabitat & Huairou Commission (2004) Local to Local Dialogue: A Grassroots Women’s Perspective on Good Governance www.

demanding that local authorities solve their problems, but are bringing to the table their own solutions, strategies and resources. The documentation ( in a simple user-friendly format) of the gains and setbacks women experience in these negotiations provide opportunities for women to reflect on, appreciate and learn from the organizing and relationship building undertaken by mother centers.

A survey of 93 mother centers<sup>3</sup> and their local authorities undertaken by the Czech Mothers in 2007 to assess the quality of their relationships with each other showed that local authorities tended to be more positive than mother centers on their partnership. The two groups had different visions on how to improve their partnership. Mother Center leaders wanted to have a stronger role in advising the municipalities on family issues and in associated planning and felt that communication and collaboration needs to become more open, frequent, and stable for the partnership to mature. Municipalities were more narrowly focused, hoping the mother centers would become more involved in local special events and planning as they were more satisfied with where things stand at present. (Schilen, 2007).

## **CAMPAIGN FOR A FAMILY FRIENDLY SOCIETY**

One of the most effective strategies used by the Czech Mother Centers to advance their agenda has been their Campaign for a family-friendly society. Launched in 2004 - the same year that the Government announced the 10<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Year of the Family<sup>4</sup> - the Family Friendly campaign was devised to convey to the Government that the falling birthrate in the country was the result of families perceiving children as a burden to their social and economic status. The Campaign seeks to draw attention to concrete ways in which Government can demonstrate its support to families through city planning around safety of women and children, flexible jobs and child-friendly public facilities and services. It challenges public and private sectors to actively demonstrate through deeds rather than words their commitment to promoting families and children in the Czech Republic. Most importantly the Campaign brings grassroots women and their roles as mothers into the public sphere, supporting them to advocate on their own behalf, contradicting two dominant trends:

1. Grassroots women are usually at the periphery of public policy and decision making
2. Women's roles as caregivers are generally trivialized or taken for granted

The Network of the Czech Mothers received substantial political support coupled with media attention for their Family-Friendly Society campaign. With Czech Republic's integration into the European Union requiring the Government meet European standards of Equal Opportunities, the EU Council for Equal Opportunities recognized

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<sup>3</sup> Presentation by Lucie Svatošová at 15<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Celebrations of Network of Mother Centers on November 30, 2007.

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that the Family Friendly campaign of the Czech Mother Centers was promoting innovative and practical ways of advancing equal opportunities in the Czech Republic, such that it advanced the domain of equal opportunities to go beyond the workplace..

The Family Friendly Campaign rewards and recognizes public facilities and businesses that create child friendly spaces, childcare services and flexible working conditions for mothers. In 2006 Petr Nečas, Minister for Labor and Social Affairs agreed to participate in the Family Friendly awards ceremony of the Czech Mother Centers. While his presence alone conveyed the National Government's support for the efforts of the Mother Centers, the Minister's public declaration of his Ministry's support and ambitions to win the family friendly award made it clear that the Government was prepared to partner with the Mother Centers.

Minister Petr Nečas stated in a radio program soon after the 2006 event:  
*"We are recently drafting several amendments to the social policies to support the concerns of families... I have also decided that our office (the MoLSA) will be a leading example of what it means to be a family-friendly institution that which will be promotes concerns of families with small children. We will try to meet their needs for part time, flexible employment. Our next plan is to receive the Family Friendly award from the Network of Mother Centers. All our future activity will show that we are serious about transforming our approach towards families. We will demonstrate this by creating new children's corners in public places such as in job centers, the MoLSA, the Czech Social Security Administration and in other institutions...This all will be done to highlight the fact that family is an absolute essential unit of our society. Who else should be the leading example than the MoLSA?" ( Lobbying Approaches- Kolinska)*

The 2007 Family Friendly Awards for initiatives by private and public sector/citizen groups to improve the quality of life for families with young children were selected by a distinguished committee of prominent actors, scholars, and conferred with the help of Minister Necas. Six organizations - ranging from large multinationals such as Hewlett Packard, Accenture, IBM and local head-hunting agencies and family health clinics received accepted awards for ensuring that workplaces provided mothers with flexible hours, the opportunity to work from home or share a job with a colleague; for supporting preschool programs close to the work place, and for providing family health services in a manner that treated parents as partners to doctors and nurses. More than thirty five mother centers (new and old) were also recognized for their decision to join the national network and advance a broad, collective vision of how Czech society can value and support the well being of women, children, their families and communities (Schilen, 2007)

## **FORMALIZING THE NETWORK AND NEGOTIATING WITH GOVERNMENT FOR LEGITIMACY**

This collaborative relationship with the Government, however, has been accomplished after a long struggle on the part of the Mother Centers. The notion of citizens partnering or even negotiating with government was as alien to women in the newly democratic Czech Republic, as it was to government officials. It was the need to consolidate the widespread efforts of individual centers and legitimize the mother centers in the eyes of the Government, while preserving the unique identity and integrity of the centers and that compelled the Mother Centers to formalize the network and engage the Government

### **Defending the status of the Mother Centers**

In Czechoslovakia before the Revolution the state ran nurseries and kindergartens where women had no choice but to leave their children when they went to work. After the Revolution these Communist institutions were abolished. The Government's way of ensuring the wellbeing of pre-school children was through the payment of a family allowance. The family allowance provided by the Government is meant for one parent to stay out of the workforce to take care of children up to 4 years of age. The rules prevent families from spending their allowance on childcare services outside the home for more than 3 days a month. Violating this rule results in forfeiting the allowance as the Government sees the allowance as its way of paying parents (virtually always mothers) to stay at home to take care of children. Similar to the German experience, Czech mothers also found themselves socially isolated by their private child-raising. Also, young mothers find it particularly difficult to re-enter the job market (when the allowance ends after four years) as most employers are reluctant to hire mothers with young children.

As more and more women began to initiate and use the mother centers, the question arose as to what the legal status of these Mother Centers was. In 1997 a complaint filed with the authorities in a small town called Litomy stated that the mother centers were in fact childcare facilities which meant that those using the Centers for more than 3 days in a month were violating the rules governing the family allowance. To have the centers classified as a childcare facility -comparable to a kindergarten or a babysitting service where parents left their children - threatened the existence of the entire network thus leaders were forced to enter into a dialogue with Government to address this problem (Kolinska, 2006)

In spite of their efforts, the leaders Rut Kolinska and Jitka Hermannova failed to convince the Ministry for Labor and Social Affairs firstly that the Mother Centers were not a childcare facility and secondly that families should be allowed to access childcare services for more than three days a month. The Government's stance was that women should stay at home to take care of children as the Government paid them to do so. A key problem in these negotiations was the fact that Government officials were unable to



grasp the idea of a self-help initiative for childcare that was collectively organized through voluntary efforts of mothers as they had no experience of such institutions in the communist era.

Their failure to convince the Government made the Czech Mothers realize how challenging it was going to be to educate the Government and how they would have to systematically plan and design their advocacy strategy to address this. Such planning included identifying allies who could be strong advocates inside the Government and being well prepared with their arguments during negotiations. It would take another five years for the Government to amend the Act to increase the number of days that families would be permitted to use other childcare services to 5 days every month.

During their initial negotiations with the Government, Rut Kolinska also realized that she did not have any formal, legal authority to officially represent the network of Mother Centers. She had always represented or supported individual centers in their individual negotiations with local authorities. Nor did she have formal status as a leader and representative of the growing network. This led to her decision to “open a new discussion leading to a formation of efficient organization, to protect the interests of the network of Mother Centers”. In 1999 at the assembly of all the mother centers in the country where Jitka Hermannova, Lucie Slaukova were elected to be part of a three-member governing council along with Rut Kolinska. At this assembly many women began calling for an independent entity that gave them an identity distinct from the Prague Mothers. (Kolinska, 2001.)

### **Peer exchange on citizen-state partnership**

Another milestone in the evolution of the Czech Mothers and their partnership with government officials was the bus trip to Stuttgart with National and Local Government officials in 1999. The Czech delegation consisted of fourteen representatives from the MCs, six representatives from the local government administration, the Ambassador of the Ministry of the Interior of the Czech Republic and the Government representative from the Human Rights Department. The idea was to expose mothers as well as government officials to the Baden-Wurttemberg regional network of the German Mother Centers which had the support of local and national governments to demonstrate how a network could create a platform for partnership between Mother Centers and local authorities and governments.

Discussing the gains of this learning exchange and roundtable Rut Kolinska said, *“The visit to Germany with our politicians was an important achievement for us... It helped us to persuade our politicians and bureaucrats at 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 to understand one another’ view points...The debates we had not only in the official meetings, but also in the bus home and in our respective communities were very enriched y this experience”* (MINE 2006)

### **Linking with other grassroots women's organizations through global networks**

It was in the same year that Czech Mother Centers decided to join GROOTS International a network of grassroots women's organizations and the Huairou Commission, a coalition of grassroots networks and professional partners. The Czech Mothers' found that their membership of global networks with similar principles and values served to amplify the messages and make women feel they are part of a larger struggle beyond their own local neighborhoods and nations. In addition to this, leaders of the Czech Mothers saw that linkages and exchanges with international network members advanced the credibility and impact of the Czech Mothers in their own country. "Our partnership with global networks such as MINE<sup>5</sup>, GROOTS<sup>6</sup>, and also our cooperation with the Huairou Commission plays an important role in a small country. Our participation in international projects draws attention and shows us as a rather important institution. Thanks to this fact we can share experiences or problems with our colleagues abroad, who might be dealing with similar issues. We are also inspired and encouraged by the success of our colleagues in other countries - the knowledge that they have succeeded helps us believe that we too can succeed" (Kolinska 2006).

### **European Woman of the Year Award 2003**

Rut Kolínská, the founder and promoter of Mothers' Centers in the Czech Republic, won Women of Europe Award in Copenhagen, Denmark on May 10, 2003. The international jury appreciated her volunteer work which has significantly contributed to development of civil society in the Czech Republic.

Rut Kolínská so became the first Czech awarded by this prestigious prize. Women of Europe Award was introduced for the first time in 1987 in Brussels, Belgium.

See: <http://www.zena-evropy.webz.cz>

#### **RUT KOLÍNSKÁ: LITTLE BIG WOMAN**

TINY AND FRAGILE, yet unbelievably strong and charismatic. That's Rut Kolínská (52), mother of five and the founder of maternity centers in the Czech Republic. This year she was one of finalists in the Czech round of the Swiss Schwab Foundation's worldwide "Social Entrepreneur" competition. Mr. and Mrs Schwab, the well-known founders and organizers of the World Economic Forum in Davos, strive to ensure that the world of business and big money works together with those who don't just look out for themselves, but try to improve the quality of the lives for others through their business activities.

This applies directly to Rut Kolínská. When in 1992 she founded the first maternity center in Prague, she certainly had no idea that 15 years later there would be 117 of them throughout the

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Czech Republic! The philosophy of the maternity centers is simple: to help mothers who have found themselves isolated due to maternity leave, and to establish contacts with similarly "afflicted" women. "We help each other by sharing experiences, but we also have all sorts of educational, sports, and requalification programs," says Kolínská.

She sees the maternity centers' greatest benefit in their function as real schools of civic life. "Additionally, we're certain that we're helping increase the birth-rate," claims Kolínská, who serves as an example for other mothers. "They regard her very highly, and when they get to know her personally they immediately have greater self-confidence," says Lucie Slauková, a close colleague of the founder. Whether Kolínská will add to her Woman of Europe 2002 title by winning the Social Entrepreneur competition remains to be seen. It's said that this Christian woman, who is happiest when her large family gathers at home, will continue to work with the centers - until she retires.

See: <http://www.praguetribune.cz/2005/12/3.htm>

The Schwab Foundation's Award to Rut Kolinska for being the "European Woman of the Year" brought a great deal of media attention and the opportunity to do a regular radio program that enabled more women to learn about the mother centers. The award and the publicity that followed provided a platform to communicate to the public why the mother centers matter/how they are working to empower women and children and improve life for families. By 2003 the Network had grown to about 110 centers.

### **Formalizing the Network: Consolidating Visions and Values**

While a small group of leaders saw clearly the value of a consolidated network, most mothers in the Czech Mother Centers were pre occupied running their individual centers and it took a while for them to fully understand the critical importance of a formal network as platform for both sharing lessons and experiences as well as influencing national and city policies and programs..

In March 2001 at the annual assembly of the Czech Mothers, leaders were given the mandate to set up an autonomous association called the 'Network of Mother Centers in Czech Republic'. By October of the same year the Network was formally registered with the Ministry of the Interior. In March 2002 First Plenary Assembly of the newly registered Network of Mother Centers in the Czech Republic elected a new 3 member governing council. It was decided that the mother centers who wanted to formally join the new Network of Mother Centers would have to register with the Network by formally signing a declaration agreeing to uphold the values and principles of the Mother Centers. Benefits of joining the Network included – access to a larger network for problem solving, collaboration, sharing lessons, accessing technical assistance and advisory services of professional partners.

The Governing Council would set the agenda for the Network in consultation with the Assembly which would meet every year. As the scale of operations grew and activities intensified the decision making and operational structure had to be adjusted to address this. Thus in 2007 it was decided that the Governing Council would need more intensive

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consultation with thematic working groups for managing the activities while the larger, national assembly and the elections would now be held only every three years.

Today the governing council (presidium) is comprised of the president and four vice presidents all elected by mother centers, where each center has one vote. There is also an elected governing board (control commission) that is accountable to the governing board for all its actions.

From 2004 - 2006<sup>7</sup> the Network of Mother Centers was supported by Dutch funding to undertake regional organizing work and hire regional coordinators so that women could create regional sub-network's to for learning and advocacy with regional government.

The governing council now implements its activities through several working committees.

- Expansion/ Scaling up committee consisting of mother center leaders
- PR Lobbying Committee: also made up of mother center leaders
- Regional coordinators - staff<sup>8</sup>
- Financial Committee: staff but under this committee there is also a fundraising group of volunteers from the mother centers
- Administration who are also paid staff

Through its different campaigns 'Family Friendly Societies, Living with Prams, Local to Dialogues and 'My Daddy Rocks' The Network of Mother Centers currently focuses on:

1. Bringing parenting and child-raising into the public domain by recognizing and making visible the social contributions women make when they raise children – ensuring that women are not physically and socially isolated while parenting and that parenting is not taken for granted.

2. Creating dialogue mechanisms that enable citizen-government engagement and collaboration. This means creating platforms through women can come together collectively analyze concerns and develop solutions which women can implement jointly with the government.

3. Promoting new forms of community development and infrastructure that reflects the needs of families with children,

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<sup>7</sup> Again from 2006-2008 for 18 months

<sup>8</sup> MCs are required to network, collaborate and function regionally in order to negotiate with regional governments

## **IMPACTS AND INSIGHTS**

### **A Vibrant and Expanding Network with a Common Vision of Change**

The 252 Mother Centers federated and formalized as a network across villages, towns and cities enables the centers to consolidate their identity, clearly articulate their principles and values and hold a vision of the changes they want to bring about. All these help the individual mothers and the many mother centers to act in unison, aggregate their impact and steadily press local authorities, government and businesses to operate in ways that address the concerns of women. The rapidly expanding network indicates the large number of women across the country who are eager to run centers through voluntary efforts, claim public spaces and sign up to the priorities, principles and values represented by the Network of MCs in the Czech Republic. Today the Network has 252 members (with 70 new MCs signing up in the last year alone.) *The efforts of the Mother Centers have created spaces for women to undertake childcare collectively, access child-friendly infrastructure in their neighborhoods and influence legislation on social policy. Eg Government now allows women to use childcare facilities for 5 days a month and the Ministry is trying to get mothers accredited to run childcare centers.*

### **Mothers as Agents of Change**

Through peer support, mentoring and providing linkages the Network of Mother Centers brings together women advocate for themselves as citizens. These are ordinary women who are empowered to negotiate for public space, finance and equal opportunities, to organize centers and manage their activities, through self-help and dialogue with government officials and systems that will respect and respond to family priorities. This helps to build women's self confidence so that they see themselves as caregivers, workers, and citizens who can improve the quality of life of children, families and communities. They are empowered to decide and shape these in ways that work for them. This is a significant change from being identified as beneficiaries of state run programs or clients seeking services of professionals.

### **Building Democracy, Influencing Policy and Learning Citizenship**

In post-communist Czech Republic, the Mother Centers represents a pioneering civil society initiative that is bottom-up and homegrown: two unusual qualities in the transition period. Platforms for civic engagement were new to citizens and government officials alike and the Mother Centers have found a number of ways to communicate their priorities and plans to their communities and elected officials in ways that help people bring their day to day family issues into social and public policy. Over time, by building a network of size and impact and initiating a multi-year national campaign to build a family friendly society, the Czech Mothers have been able to create allies in the

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national and local government who are openly supportive of the Network's agendas and are taking concrete steps to modify social policies in accordance with these by promoting flexible job creation, accrediting mothers to provide childcare services for payment. From next year the Ministry will officially endorse the Family Friendly Awards with the Mother Centers.

The Minister of Labor and Social Affairs remarks at the 15<sup>th</sup> Anniversary celebrations of the Czech Mothers in 2007 illustrated the impact of the network's awareness raising and advocacy when he said:

*"It should not be one solution for all families. Families should decide how they want to spend time with children....From next year the family allowance will be more flexible allowing families to decide whether they want the subsidy for one, two or three years. We must change the perception that mothers who want to go back to work are not good mothers. We need more pre-school institutions....we know that mothers on maternity leave can take care of many children and can earn money while they do this but this is not legal. We must try to get mothers, NGOs and CBOs and MCs accredited as caregivers."*

In the context of post-Communist society: the mother center contradicts the workplace-driven priorities and state-run childcare services that displaced recognition for women's contribution as parents. At the same time the mother center redefines traditional 'housewife/ mother' identity of women by highlighting the social and economic value of women's contributions. By bringing these roles and responsibilities into public, collective spaces where women can share, redefine and socially validate them. Women, by creating a network of scale and impact, can now tell private sector, government and men how they want to balance their employment and career aspirations with family and children; and the economic, political resources and support are needed for women to realize their aspirations.

The focus of European Union policies on equal opportunity has been on advancing non-discriminatory practices in the workplace. In this context, the Mother Centers movement have propelled a bottom-up discussion of what constitutes 'equal opportunity'. Mother Centers and have made this about much more than workplace issues: they have put family friendly priorities on the social/political agenda and encouraged diverse, multiple perspectives.

In his congratulatory message to the Mother Centers on their 15<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Vaclav Havel's message drew attention to the fact that the Mother Centers represent solidarity and value based efforts in a rapidly commercializing world. His statement highlights the fact that the Mother Centers has carved out for itself a very special place that is built on the voluntary efforts and values; and which rejects both the compulsory collectivism promoted by the communist state and the commercialization that is occurring as a result of the country's rapid transition to capitalism.

## **LESSONS FOR FEMINIST ORGANIZING AND MOVEMENTS**

### **Organizing and Linking Women Locally, Nationally and Globally**

The Czech Mothers' experience of organizing re-iterates the need for physical spaces and mobility that allows women to bring their children and link with peers to collectively reflect on their concerns and develop solutions. The Czech mothers' experience of learning from the German Mother Centers (part of the MINE network) and their participation in the GROOTS International and Huairou Commission's Local to Local Dialogue initiative points to the role of global networks of grassroots women in sharing effective strategies, affirming and encouraging women and amplifying the credibility and impact that grassroots women have on policymakers.

### **Breaking new ground for the women's movement**

Grassroots mothers, organizing around child rearing and public support for families with young children, can, by creating a large constituency, reclaim and reframe issues & take power away from right wing, conservative forces who thrive on organizing around 'respecting and protecting the family' invariably in exclusionary, patriarchal forms.

The majority of 'ordinary' working class and poor women value their roles as mothers/wives and see family as central to their identities. As a grassroots women's movement Czech Mothers have organized such women to: critically reflect on these roles and identities; pilot new and cooperative ways to address practical issues involved in raising families; create values and establish public standards that prevent discriminatory behavior and develop platforms for action which mothers can use to make public claims on governments, businesses, and male partners for support and resources to assist them

The Mother Centers Network does all of these effectively by being a consciousness raising force for women and for society. The movement breaks the class and gender biases against women as mothers by creating a critical mass of 'every day/ordinary' women (neither Marxists nor 'professional') who can articulate and demonstrate the value of their unpaid work, create peer based knowledge-sharing and empowerment processes that women can manage themselves, while advancing public advocacy campaigns that force governments and the private sector to respond to their priorities.

The Mother Centers movement is thus breaking critical new ground that the feminist movement has not been able to tap.

### **"Family-oriented" vs "Feminist" Organization**

Women involved with the Mother Centers don't necessarily see it as a movement as women had different associations with this concept and did not on their own describe

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their organizing or work in this way for eg. Some saw Greenpeace and the Velvet Revolution as a movement. This may be because women don't perceive themselves as having the potential to create a movement and because of the way in which they define 'movements.'

But leaders also point out that that women's movement does not see them as "real feminists" because their work is deeply embedded in their care-giving roles in the family – an institution which has largely been condemned as oppressive by 'feminists'. The Mother Centers differentiate themselves from "feminist" organizations by identifying themselves as "family-oriented" organizations. However, in the myriad ways in which the Czech Mothers organize and empower themselves to address women's concerns, they are indeed a women's empowerment organization and they seem themselves as working for the "empowerment of mothers."

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