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GRASSROOTS WOMEN'S INTERNATIONAL ACADEMY (GWIA) 1999: EAST - WEST DIALOGUE



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I Workshop Analysis

1 Summary

The National Association of German Mother Centers and the Mother Center 2000 in Salzgitter Bad together with the Huairou Commission and GROOTS are conducting a Grassroots Womens International Academy (GWIA) during the World Fair Expo 2000.

In preparation for this worldwide event two GWIA workshops with European groups were conducted. GWIA 1998 brought together grassroots women's groups from West European metropolitan cities working on the issue of multicultural communities.

This report puts together the results of GWIA 1999 which focussed on creating a East West dialogue between grassroots women's groups. Grassroots women's groups from post socialist countries in Central and Eastern Europe (Bulgaria, Ukraine, Russia, Czech Republic, Romania and Bosnia Herzegowina) as well as women's groups from Germany and Holland focussing on creating East West European networks were invited to participate.

In this week of extensive exchange a sense of a common Europe was born.

The groups from Central and Eastern Europe reported on the work they are doing to maintain mutual support networks and caring neighborhoods often under traumatic conditions, extreme poverty and despair. The West European groups reported on work they are doing with migrant women and refugee families from Central and Eastern European countries.

During the dialogues of GWIA 1999 women on both sides developed more mutual understanding and bonding that resulted in several joint projects:

In February 2000 a regional networking meeting of grassroots women's groups from Central and Eastern Europe is organised in Prague by the National Association of Czech Mother Centers.

We have discovered during this week of GWIA 1999 that although we are geographically very close we know very little about each other, said Rut Kolinska, the founder of the Czech Mother Centers. We have experienced here that we have much in common, that we are concerned about the future of our families and countries, that we are struggling to create a strong civil society, a caring climate, support networks and active neighborhoods in our societies. I have a vision that by creating a regional network of grassroots women's groups in Central and Eastern Europe solidarity and friendship can develop in our region from the bottom up.

The Mother Centers of Baden Wuerttemberg committed to be partners to the Mother Centers being set up in Bosnia Herzegowina (in Sarajewo and in Sanski Most). There is a strong need for something like Mother Centers in our country said Mirella Mulalic Handan from the Mother Center initiative in Sarajewo.

Many women have lost their husbands, relatives and family networks during the war and need a place in the community where they can turn to to find support, confidence and strength to start anew.

The Mother Center in Pirna is planning a joint handicrafts fair with the Czech Mother Center in Jileva, just across the boarder to strengthen cross national trade and networks in their region.

From a visit to the Mother Center in Bremen Huchting a Mother Center initiative was created in St. Petersburg, that has started translating the German Mother Center handbook into Russian.

We wish to create a strong and united European voice of grassroots women's groups at GWIA 2000 and beyond. Inna Lazaruk from the Ukraine, this workshop has certainly been an important step in this direction.

2 Country Profiles

The situation in post socialist countries in Central and Eastern Europe varies widely concerning social and economic backgrounds. Some countries are managing better than others, where the economic and social structure, the labor market, education and health systems have broken down or deteriorated extremely, to the extent of qualifying as underdeveloped countries. Many countries are characterised by a disorientation of social roles and life patterns, concerning poverty, gender relations, and religious and ethnic traditions. Individual identities and social relations have become increasingly instable.

The local reports presented by the GWIA 1999 participants are documented in section II of this report. Here a synopsis of the country backgrounds is undertaken, pointing out the specific profiles and issues of the different countries.

In Russia and the Ukraine the issues of poverty, unemployment and health problems as well as lethargy and mental depression are virulent. In the disorientation after the break down of the Russian empire moral values have weakened, the rate of criminality is high and the mafia heavily installed. Survival issues prevail. Even if people have more political rights and freedom, they often do not know how to make use of them. Grassroots women's groups are struggling to spread the consciousness that even in the darkest of situations self initiative and mutual support systems can be developed.

The Soldiers Mothers of St. Petersburg are confronting the issue of internal physical and sexual violence in the Russian army. Every year 5000 soldiers die during peace time in the Russian army and 70 000 soldiers desert. The Soldiers Mothers are focussing on how to protect the dignity and rights of recruits and soldiers.

In Romania grassroots women's groups are confronting the issue of institutionalised and abandoned children, coming from the tradition during the communist regime, where it was considered a socialist way of up-bringing to institutionalise children in children's homes. Parents in Romania feel they have subsequently suffered a loss of confidence and competence in their parenting skills.

In Bulgaria life before the political transition was experienced like a stillness in a vacuum, there were no alternatives, life was carved out in a collective manner. Now there is more freedom but life and survival issues are also much harder, social problems and tensions that were hidden in the socialist regime have emerged, it is very difficult to find one's own orientation and one's own path.

Grassroot women's groups are confronting the issue that people have not learned to tackle problems themselves and to map their own resources, but are waiting for help to come from outside, mainly from the West.

In the Czech Republic women are confronting the issue of building democracy and a civil society from the bottom up, of confronting corruption and of maintaining cultural values against a new current of career and consumer orientation.

In Bosnia women are confronting the destruction of the social fabric of their society. War destroyed social and public life. Social security was based on the extended family and collective networks. War has torn apart these networks, destroyed families, neighborhoods and villages, dispelled people from their homes, home towns and communities and created an individualisation process unknown of previously in Bosnian society.

Inter ethnic tensions are supplemented in post war Bosnian society by a social war between haves and have nots, between people that have profited from the war and those that have lost everything.

Practically every woman in Bosnia has a background of family separation or war trauma, it is therefore important not to neglect the individual development of women, to address issues of fear and rebuilding confidence and trust in life.

In the former German Democratic Republic the prevailing feeling is that much has been gained, especially personal choice and freedom, but also much has been lost. The latter applies especially to a culture of social support, which has given way to more of an individualistic and elbow culture.

There is considerable resentment towards West Germany and the way reunification was conducted, the main accusation being that the West showed no interest in assessing and maintaining the positive aspects of East German society and that no efforts were undertaken to maintain the East German industry and economy.

3 Common Issues, Common Strategies

In the workshop presentations and debates several common threads and issues became apparent that strengthened the interest and motivation in regional networking.

Reweaving the Social Fabric

Isolation is a big issue in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe. The disruption of old patterns and securities, the shame and despair of poverty and not coping causes many people to hide in their homes and not go out into the public.

In Bosnia many women feel apathetic and inactive, still waiting for their husbands or relatives to come home and save them. In a survey done in Charkov 70% of the women answered that they don't believe they can make it through the next day.

It is therefore a common issue to create places to convene, where they can get out of the isolation of their houses and make new contacts.

I am alone now, I need to make new ties. I cannot rely anymore on my family or relations. They are no more. For me joining the Mother Center was a way to create new relationships, a new family. I need something like this, when I go back to Bosnia. I am no longer allowed to stay in Germany, but I will bring with me a valuable experience, the experience of how to create friendships and neighborhoods. (Refugee from Bosnia)

In our initiative an important part is organising family events, excursions, and celebrating traditional festivities in the neighborhood. We create communication and hope, joy and a feeling of togetherness this way. This is very important. (Russia)

For the women in our centers the fact of meeting others with similar views and ideas but also with different backgrounds and social situations is very inspiring. Learning to be together and to care for each other is essential. (Czech Republic).

Rebuilding Civil Society

In all countries the tradition of civil associations and groups was discontinued during the communist regime. The state and the party were in charge of all and everything and initiatives or self help projects of citizens were discouraged. Social problems were denied, there was no uncensored information.

We were living together, but did not know much about each other, about our environment, our community. Officially there were no problems, so there also was no need to create solutions. It was only after the revolution that we became aware of all the social problems in our society. The information about the dramatic situation of abandoned children in institutionalised homes hit us at the same time it hit the international public. Only after the revolution the necessity to build associations became visible and only then it was possible. That is why all the NGOs were created after the transition. That is why people are so eager now to help, to join NGOs, to care for the community and to change society. (Romania)

In Charkov 1500 NGOs have been registered. We are learning to take initiative, to develop ourselves, to exchange and organise with others. This is a big difference to before. (Charkov)

Everything we have, everything that functions we have because somebody has been active and taken responsibility for it. This is important to realise. Then you begin to think, what is your contribution, where do you want to take responsibility. (Germany)

Taking responsibility for community issues for many groups plays into participating in local governance.

To be able to make a difference and make changes without doing party politics is what I find attractive in our work. In this way we are also good role models for our children. (Czech Republic)

As a young woman before the transition I did not think about politics, I never thought about society. But when things changed and I came into the Mother Center I realised: hey, it is possible to do something. I was fascinated by all the active women in the center and before long I also learned to take steps and be part of the solution. We have changed the whole childcare system in our town. (Former German Democratic Republic)

We have become active in our community. We inform people about their rights, i.e. that they are entitled to social security. We also work with the politicians, explain to them how the people are living. Many of them have no idea. Now many officials in our administration are more understanding. (Russia)

No Mother Center is founded explicitly with the goal of local governance, but it invariably happens. Because when women meet and start thinking about their

lives and their environment they start becoming active on local issues. There are many things that need to be changed to be more child and family friendly and the Mother Center women help change them. (Germany)

In the last years several women from our centers have actually run for office in local government. There are several issues we are lobbying for, legislation that needs reform, resources for self-help initiatives. We engage in local governance independent of political parties. (Czech Republic)

Rebuilding Family Competencies

Issues that grassroots women's groups in Central and Eastern European countries are concerned about very often relate to the family. Many express a feeling that the family was weakened during socialism and that it is important to rebuild the confidence and competencies of the family.

In Romania grassroots women's groups are concerned with re-establishing and protecting families, with helping them stay together and find ways to solve their own problems. They are also active in offering childcare to children who would otherwise be unattended at home or on the streets.

In Moscow mothers groups are addressing issues of handicapped children and creating mutual support networks that are also reaching out to other parents.

In the Ukraine activities focus on programs with children, and improving the quality of family life.

In Bosnia grassroots women's groups are addressing the issues of child birth and early maternity, family relations and family planning. They are also taking the lead in rebuilding childcare services which have been completely destroyed by the war.

The Soldiers Mothers in St. Petersburg are organizing as mothers to protect and support their sons.

In the Czech Republic the Prague Mothers actively address health issues of their children combatting pollution because it affects the health of their children and fighting for a safer future of their children.

Family values are so important. Especially nowadays when the prevailing image seems to be the young men in suits with a handy in their hand, making a career on the market. Taking care of children, helping them become full human beings to me is the most beautiful task in the world. (Czech Republic)

Rebuilding Self-Confidence

The importance of addressing and dealing with fear and intimidation in Central and Eastern European Countries was a further common issue. How to counteract fear and gain confidence towards power structures was seen as an important part of overcoming socialist mentality.

A legacy of the communist regime was described as a big gap between people in power and the population. A culture of distance and intimidation often still prevails. This needs to be confronted on both sides. An important part of the grassroots women's work is to rebuild self-confidence and trust in the power of the people.

A system where there is such a big power gap between the people in power and the population makes a very instable society and in the end is self destructive. Where does the system get power from, from the fear of the people. Therefore we find it very important in our work to focus on the issue of fear and intimidation, to help understand how fear works and how it can be overcome.
(Russia)

Common Approaches and Methods

Some common threads had to do with methods and approaches that grassroots women's groups from Central and Eastern Europe found effective in their work.

The importance of claiming space, of having own premises was stressed by all.

People need to know where to meet. They need a place to identify with as their space. Continuity comes with having your own premises. We want to reclaim banks that are closing down as community centers. Huge buildings are empty because they are bankrupt. We don't need buildings for money, we need buildings for people. In times of crisis people need to learn to be together.
(Bulgaria)

Another aspect that became evident in the work of grassroots women's groups is their value based approach.

Love, family, dignity, well-being and peace. That is what we are all working for. In our work we want to touch the hearts of people, we want to learn to live together in peace and tolerance, we want to relearn the art of caring for each other, of helping each other (Bosnia)

A method that was seen as very effective was the method of testimony or story-telling.

People open up when they hear the stories of others. We work almost exclusively with this method: This is what happened to me and this is how I came out of it. People believe more when they hear authentic stories. (St. Petersburg)

What we do in our centers is create a comfortable space where parents can listen to each other and hear each others stories. Informal exchanges like that create the atmosphere of trust that is so important. (Romania)

4 Migration and Remigration in the Context of Networking

Poverty and war has created a big wave of migration from Central and Eastern European Countries into Germany. What became evident in this workshop is that a side effect of migration is a process of cross pollination and networking that is instrumental in helping Europe grow together.

In this workshop refugees and migrant women from the German Mother Centers met women from their home countries. This encounter was very moving and very intense and showed a big potential of solidarity and networking.

Refugee women now living in Germany have not forgotten their origins and have a great deal of motivation to support projects in the countries they came from.

In the case of Bosnia German legislation obliges many refugees to return to their country. What became evident in this workshop is that many women go back with the intention to bring back what they have experienced and learned during their stay in Germany for the benefit of their countries.

The project Fenix in Sanski Most has been initiated by a young Bosnian midwife returning to her country after being a refugee in Berlin, where she received her training and participated in a women's self-help birth center.

Refugee women who found a home away from home in German Mother Centers expressed their determination to create a Mother Center in their home town, when returning to their country.

The importance of women's self help projects in Germany in integrating refugees and migrant women and supporting their empowerment and development was highlighted in the testimonies of the participants of this workshop not only regarding the situation in Germany but also in an international context.

When I came to Germany I only knew how to say good morning in German. I found a job taking care of an elderly lady in her home. Every day she taught me a little bit more German. I came alone to Germany. I had no idea what had happened to my family or where they were. The family of this elderly lady helped me a great deal. When she died I found a job working at the bar in a hotel. Then something marvellous happened. My boyfriend that I had lost contact to during the war found me, after years. We married and got two children. During this time I felt very isolated and alone in Germany, I was at home and had no contacts. I had many problems with the children and felt completely overwhelmed. This is when I found the Mother Center. A woman I met on the playground told me about it and one day she took me there.

At the Mother Center I met women who were dealing with the same problems I was dealing with: screaming children, house work that never seems to end and the feeling of being left alone with it all.

In the Mother Center I felt welcomed, in the Mother Center I found friends.

When I learned that my father had died during the war and that I would never be able to see him again I was very depressed. But when you know people, when you have friends, life goes on. The Mother Center helped me very much during this time. Now I am quite active in our center and am the one who welcomes other

refugee women into the center. In three months I have to return to Bosnia. I have gathered so much information, inspiration and strength here I will not be coming with empty hands. I am determined, and if it starts in some rooms in a cellar, to found a Mother Center there and I know I can count on help from the women here. And now I even have met at this workshop other women from other towns in Bosnia who are starting Mother Centers, so I know I will not be alone. (Refugee from Bosnia)

I came into the Mother Center because they were offering a German course. But what intrigued me was that this course was combined with a course preparing us to be Ñhostsì in the Mother Center. This way, we knew we would have a small paid job in the Mother Center if we wished after the course. I think for migrant women the possibility to earn money in the Mother Centers is very important. In the years I have been in the center I have noticed that migrant women join the center in a different way than the German women. Many German women come first as visitors and then after a while take on Mother Center responsibilities and jobs.

For us it is different. We come first because it is an opportunity to earn some money and then we get a feeling for the whole project and begin to join other activities in the center. That is when real integration starts to happen.

In the beginning we were a small group of Russian speaking women in the Mother Center and had weekly meetings there. Now many programs of our city send women to us, i.e. the Red Cross or the Russian-Jewish refugee camp. For these women it is so important to find others to whom they can speak in their mother tongue. But at the same time they meet German women and learn to understand the German culture. Our group is now supporting a project in St. Petersburg to initiate a Mother Center there. It makes me very happy that I can do something for the women in my home country.

5 Thematic Debates

Empowerment

What makes grassroots women's projects inspiring to the women involved is that they not only deal with survival issues like employment, health, childrearing and childcare, family relations, violence, and social cohesion but that in the process they empower women and develop their potential and as such can also be seen as training and education projects.

This happens in a wholistic approach where all the concerns and hopes of the women involved have room to be expressed and processed and where they are encouraged to discover and develop their skills and talents. The grassroots women's groups present at this workshop described and discussed their work in such a wholistic context.

Initiators and founders usually play a crucial role in this respect. Their talent often involves the capacity to support and accelerate the development of others, to mirror their talents and strengthen their self-confidence. This involves a careful balance of challenging and reassuring. This also involves the art of learning from experiences, of supporting groups in owning their lessons learned.

Building a project and a network means being very aware of all the parts involved. In order for a net to hold, it has to be pulled from all sides with equal effort. If one side pulls too hard the net can tear and be destroyed. It is important that all talents are acknowledged and encouraged, and all contributions counted. The head cannot move without the neck. When all are aware of this and feel respected, then a net can be strong. As initiators we have the role to bring innovations and challenges, but we must be careful not to pull too hard, not to be too far ahead of the development of others. This is the challenge we are facing now that our movement is spreading so rapidly. (Czech Republic)

To really learn from mistakes, that is what makes our work so effective. Not to get stuck in an attitude of protest and accusation, against the other women in the group, against local authorities or the system, not to sit in a corner complaining but to make a careful assessment of situations and to really look. Why have we not received adequate support or funding, what is it we haven't yet learned about how the flow of money works. To take your own work seriously, you have to treat it like a science, you have to really study what works and what doesn't. Very often it is about how to treat people, not only inside the group but also outside the group, in negotiations and when making contacts and building partnerships. We are all learning in this process and when you can learn in a group, then the learning can go very far and can be very strong. (Germany)

Women's Liberation

An interesting debate and controversy at the workshop revolved around the concept of women's liberation.

On the one side it was felt that the socialist regime had given women more participation and visibility in the labor market and in public life, that they were a more equal part of society than before and that this accomplishment needed to be maintained and protected after the transition. The danger was seen that a focus on family and neighborhood issues could contribute to sustaining the traditional role of women.

On the other hand there were strong arguments that women's strength and role was not to strive for equality in playing the male game in the labor market and the public realm but to develop the side of society that is undervalued and not considered productive or political, caring for humans and human relations.

The perspective was presented that holding up family values was a power field of resistance against inhuman and totalitarian structures in society.

The violence, fear and humiliation young soldiers experience during the first year of the army deeply imprints itself on young men. The army becomes a socialisation agent for the totalitarian culture of violence and intimidation. The violence suffered is often passed on to others considered weaker and dependent, i.e. lower ranks in the army. It also however spills over to other parts of life, young men begin to violate their surroundings, and often the family.

In our work we not only work with the soldiers, we work with the whole family. We discuss with the whole family, what does it mean to be a real man. We discuss family values and that a real man is one who takes care of the family and helps his wife. We teach another culture, the culture of family support, of human dignity, of human values. We find this to be a big source of strength to confront totalitarian mentality and totalitarian structures. (Soldier Mothers, St. Petersburg)

Mother Centers were seen as a middle way, connecting to family issues, but at the same time opening channels into public life and public influence. Women are not confined inside the four walls of the private family home, but are encouraged to take part in civil society and in local governance.

When we hear speeches by conservative parties about the valuable role of the family and family values, we confront them with the question, why they confine these values only to the family and what about the rest of society? We seek to apply family values not only to the home but also to public life, to make our communities and our whole society more human. (Czech Republic)

6 Evaluation Round

In the last session of the workshop participants were asked for an evaluation round:

- ✓ The grassroots approach is very stimulating. It is important to make this distinction between NGO's and grassroots. I have understood more what this means in this workshop. (Russia)
- ✓ What I have seen here is that the Mother Centers make women very self confident and very tolerant. It is a good approach to develop women to their full potential. (Bulgaria)
- ✓ We have come together here from very different countries and cultures and yet we found that we have very similar dreams and visions, that we speak the same language when it comes to wishing for the well-being of our families and standing up for a world we believe in. (Romania)
- ✓ Being here and experiencing a Mother Center in day to day workings reminded me of the ways families were together before the war, before communities were torn apart by the war. This is what we need to get back to. (Bosnia)
- ✓ I feel very moved. I never expected such a feeling of warmth and solidarity to develop in only one week. It was very important for me to meet women from my country, to be able to give support. (Russian refugee).
- ✓ Since my family is dispersed to all corners of the world I believed I would never have the same possibility for support, communication and belonging again. Through this workshop I have seen that I can find community in other ways. (Bosnia)
- ✓ We call our rooms School for Human Rights. After this seminar we are interested in expanding our space to making it more of a community center, where families can meet and also support each other on other issues. (St. Petersburg)
- ✓ When I joined the Mother Center I started becoming aware of issues, reflecting on myself and what I want and what I can contribute. I see this happening in all the groups that participated in this workshop. In this way we are creating a kind of prepolitical space where women understand their situation and their role in society, and together with others can reflect on the needs of the community and on what can be done. In this way we are creating change. (Germany)
- ✓ Having all the children around here at the Mother Center reminded me of what is important in life and in our work. I will take these images with me. (Ukraine)
- ✓ I have fully committed to this network. I believe in this network. (Bosnia)

- ✓ Sometimes, especially when we face difficult issues, we have forgotten our female sides. This week has taught me to nourish them more again and to incorporate female values more explicitly in our work. (Russia)
- ✓ I have seen what our German Mother Centers can mean for refugees from Central and Eastern European countries. This will make me more conscious and sensitive in my work back home in my center. (Germany)
- ✓ Not only have we learned so much, we have really felt at home here. I never expected that. (Romania)
- ✓ That the situation in our home countries and our situation in Germany is the theme of this workshop has given me a boost of confidence. Now I see that my situation is not just a private and personal problem. I very rarely speak about my experiences and my background. At this workshop it became possible for me, I felt that I would be understood and that I was not something exotic. (Refugee from Russia)
- ✓ Mother Centers have come from Germany to us and we continue to have exchanges and to feel strong support and ties with the centers here. We have created friendship without boundaries not as a political program but as people. In this way I am sure Europe will grow together. (Czech Republic)
- ✓ This week of GWIA has been for us what we feel networking is all about. This is why we created GWIA, this is what we are working for. (Germany)

7 Looking Forward: GWIA 2000 and Grassroots Women's Learning Systems

The Grassroots Women's International Academy (GWIA 2000) is planned as a series of trainings conducted by grassroots women's groups from around the world. GWIA is not intended to be a conventional congress with lectures, reports and debates, but a real academy. The groups will be presenting their work in the format of a training, teaching their methods, approaches, strategies and analysis in a curriculum format, so that other groups from other parts of the globe can taste the work concretely enough to be able to adapt any strategies they are interested in to their own work and settings back home.

Grassroots women's issues need the support of mainstream partners. For this reason structured dialogues with strategic partners from the media, foundations, local and national governments, trade unions, the private sector, academia, churches and others are included in GWIA 2000 to discuss the makings of sustainable partnerships. When do partnerships between grassroots and professional partners work. When do they not.

The selection process of groups presenting at GWIA is integrated into the Our Best Practices Campaign of the Huairou Commission. The submission guidelines are included in section II of this report. The Huairou Commission is paying \$300 for every submission accepted, so that groups who feel they need support to document their work can hire someone to help them put their work and experience into the best practices submission format.

The Grassroots Womens International Academy is focussed on highlighting solutions, not problems. It contributes to grassroots groups owning their own best practices, and being the ones teaching their own lessons.

Best practices are a tool to identify and document lessons learned from experience in a manner that they can inform policies. They are a means of generating knowledge on solutions to different problems. But the question is who owns this information? Who has access to it and how is it used? Frequently, it is those who articulate experiences and

have the tools to disseminate them, rather than the innovators, who become the owners of ideas. When grassroots women's groups take ownership of information and ideas that they have created, they will be recognised as experts both within and outside their communities. It is this expertise that becomes their most valuable bargaining chip, the basis of partnerships with mainstream actors.

GWIA 2000 is a stepping stone in a long term process of claiming grassroots knowledge and setting up grassroots learning and transfer systems in which grassroots women control the teaching and dissemination of their expertise.

Parallel to such Grassroots Academies, the Mother Centers, GROOTS and the Huairou Commission are involved in the creation of a network of Living and Learning Centers, where grassroots trainings are to be conducted locally, both including horizontal peer exchanges as well as training to inform government and public policy makers, local authorities, social workers, city planners and other mainstream actors of grassroots perspectives and grassroots knowledge and wisdom.

To implement such a perspective GWIA will be addressing the following questions:

- * What are aspects of the work of grassroots women's groups that can be put into a curriculum format and a training?
- * Who are strategic partners to work with in this respect?
- * What are the experiences of how women learn?
- * What trainings have groups been involved in?
- * What are possibilities to create grassroots living and learning centers?
- * How do partner dialogues work and when is it important to conduct them?

II Workshop Documentation

1 Workshop Goals

(Monika Jaeckel)

This Workshop is part of the Grassroots Women's International Academy (GWIA) we are planning during the Expo 2000. It is the second preparatory workshop we are conducting for European grassroots groups. Last year we had a workshop with West European multicultural groups and this year we are focussing on grassroots groups from Central and Eastern European Countries.

What GWIA is focussing on is to make visible in an international and worldwide setting like the Expo 2000 the issues, perspectives and expertise of women's groups on the ground. GWIA is conducted on the background of the experiences of GROOTS and the Huairou Commission where we have seen that many solutions to central issues of our times arise locally, from women's groups dealing with everyday survival issues and the cohesion of their families and communities. This expertise often is overlooked by mainstream actors in society, because it does not come out of professional channels. GWIA is about highlighting the expertise of women as everyday life experts.

In the preparatory workshop we are conducting this week the goals are geared towards networking. Networking between grassroots women's groups in Central and Eastern European Countries and networking between groups from East and West.

What is needed to network is communication, understanding each other, our different backgrounds, our common issues and our differences. Therefore a lot of this week's workshop is dedicated to dialogue, to explaining to each other the experiences and social and cultural backgrounds we come from and how that shapes our perspectives, values, goals and policies. We will start off this dialogue with a series of questions: What does democracy mean in East and West, what does the free market mean in East and West, what does being a woman mean in East and West, what does living in societies 10 years after the fall of the Iron curtain mean in East and West. What can we learn from each other?

This exchange of viewpoints and understanding will be continued throughout the workshop in local reports from the different groups and in a series of thematic debates to be conducted in plenary. For instance, what does grassroots and neighborhood development mean in the context of the West and in the context of the East? How do we relate to the issues of peace and war in Europe? How can we contribute to conflict resolution and building bridges?

On this background of listening to each other we would like to go deeper into ways we can build networks and support systems. What are interests, wishes, hopes and options we have in building networks? Thus a second focus during this week will be on exchanging information and experiences of existing networks and examining possibilities of expanding networks and alliances.

We want to dedicate one afternoon to putting together in a small working group a concrete proposal for a Grassroots Women's Network in Central and Eastern Europe. We want to assemble which groups other than the ones who are here should be included in this outreach and which partnerships and alliances to hook up with. We want to make a networking plan of next steps, activities and outcomes connected with a budget and a

list of funders to submit this proposal to.

An aspect of working together we are particularly interested in is to discuss the Mother Center model and in what ways it makes sense in the context of post socialist societies, what ways there are to initiate Mother Centers and in what ways the concept needs to be adapted to local conditions.

Finally we want to debate the possibilities of participation in the international networks GROOTS and the Huairou Commission and in GWIA 2000.

We are very much looking forward to this exchange. We are very happy to host you here in the Mother Center 2000 and to give you a concrete taste and experience of Mother Center culture and practice as it has developed in the German Mother Centers. We are also including during this week some of the approaches and methods we have learned from our international exchanges and cooperations with grassroots groups from around the world.

2 GWIA 1999: East –West Dialogue - Program

Sunday 3.10.1999

19:00	Welcome: Monika Jaeckel, National Association of German Mother Centers Andrea Laux, Huairou Commission, Regional Center, Europe Introduction Round of Participants
20:00	Evening meal

Monday 4.10.1999

EAST-WEST DIALOGUE

8:30	Breakfast
9:30	Orientation Dorothee Schooss
10:00 – 10:45	The Concept of the SOS Mother Center Salzgitter Hildegard Schooss
10:45 – 11:00	Coffee break
11:00 – 12:00	Tour of the House
12:00 – 12:30	Workshop Goals Monika Jaeckel
12:30 – 13:00	Leadership Support Method Andrea Laux
13:00 – 14:30	Lunch Break
14:30 – 16,45	Thematic Debates Experiences, Cultural Values and Political Perspectives in Central and Eastern Europe. Kathrin Wolf, OWEN Plenary Debate: What do we have in common, what are our differences?

16:45 – 17:00	Coffee Break	
18:00 – 19:00	Qi-Gong (daily)	Maria Milchereit
19:00	Evening Meal	

Tuesday, 5.10.1999

GRASSROOTS INITIATIVES IN CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPE

9:30	Warming Up Lilo Geldmacher	
9:45 – 10:30	Local Report, Prague, Rut Kolinska, Jitka Herrmannova	
10:30 – 11:15	SINGERII and FUNDATIA COPIII NOSTRI, Bukarest Raluca Laura Neagu, Mihaela Nicolaescu	
11:15 – 11:30	Coffee Break	
11:30 – 12:15	Local Report, Sarejewo, Mirela Handan, Elma Softic Kaunitz	
12:15 – 13:00	Local Report, Charkov, Inna Lazaruk, Irina Kuzmina	
13:00 – 14:30	Lunch Break	
14:30 – 15:15	Leadership Support Method, Andrea Laux	
15:15 – 16:00	Local Report, IraV, Moskau, Irina Borodina	
16:00 – 16:15	Coffee Break	
16:15 – 17:00	Local Report, Plovdiv, Sofia, Rumjana Velcheva	
17:00 – 18:00	Local Report, Soldiers' Mothers, St. Petersburg, Elena Vilenskaya, Ella Polyakova	
19:00	Evening Meal	
20:00	Concert Gen Huitt, Salish , Native Indian, USA	

Wednesday 6.10.1999

GRASSROOTS AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

9:30	Temperature Reading Andrea Laux	
10:00 – 11:00	Thematic Debate: Self –help and Community Development in the Context of Post-Socialist Societies, Rut Kolinska	

11:00 – 11:15	Coffee Break
11:15 – 12:30	Thematic Debate Networking Needs and Possibilities Mirela Mulalic Handan
12:30 – 13:00	Meditation Monika Jaeckel
13:00 – 14:30	Lunch Break
14:30	Excursion to Goslar or Wellness Program in the Mother Center 2000 Heike Bruemmer
19:00	Evening Meal Russian Tea Ceremony

Thursday 7.10.1999

NETWORKING: BUILDING ON EXPERIENCES

9:30 – 9:45	Warming up, Lilo Geldmacher
9:45 – 10:15	East West European Network, Berlin (OWEN) Kathrin Wolf, Temenuga Wegner
10:15 – 10:45	National Association of German Mother Centers, Andrea Laux
10:45 – 11:15	GROOTS and Huairou Commission Monika Jaeckel
11:15 – 11:30	Coffee Break
11:30 – 12:00	National Association of Czech Mother Centers Rut Kolinska, Jitka Herrmannova
12:00 – 12:30	International Council of Women (ICW) Lilli Hutjes, Netherlands
12:30 – 13:00	Women's Peace Network, Bosnia Mirela Mulalic Handan
13:00 – 14:30	Lunch Break
14:30 – 18:00	Group A: Developing a Networking Proposal Chair: Rut Kolinska
14:30 – 18:00	Group B: Conflict Resolution Methods Chair:Hannelore Weskamp
20:00	Festive Dinner

Friday 8.10.1999

FUTURE PERSPECTIVES

9:30 – 9:45	Temperature Reading Andrea Laux
9:45 – 12:00	Immigrants and Refugees in the German Mother Centers Hannelore Weskamp
11:00 – 11:15	Coffee Break
12:00 – 13:00	Thematic Debate: Replicability and Transfer: The Role of Mother Centers in Western and Eastern Europe. Andrea Laux
13:00 – 14:30	Lunch Break
14:30 – 15:00	Leadership Support Method Andrea Laux
15:00 – 16:30	Thematic Debate: Preparing for GWIA 2000 Monika Jaeckel
16:30 – 17:00	Coffee Break
17:00 – 18:00	Evaluation Round Andrea Laux
19:00	Evening Meal

5 Local Reports

MOTHER CENTER 2000

(Hildegard Schooss)

The Mother Center in Salzgitter is one of the three original model centers.

What proves to be so inspiring to women's groups is the Mother Center approach to reevaluate the experience of motherhood in contemporary societies, to reevaluate competences that are learned in daily life with children and to claim public space for women and children, a „public living room“, as our centers are often described.

The SOS Mother Center in Salzgitter has continued to be a pioneer. It was the first to create „Neighborhood Services“, offering proximity services like childcare, pick up services, laundry services, shopping services, lunch and catering services, hair dressing, massage, sewing services, maintenance and repair services and eldercare to the community, thus creating employment and family friendly jobs for Mother Center women as well as reviving and deepening intergenerational neighborhood care and support structures.

Eldercare is offered as daytime mobile care including nursing services, housekeeping services, escort services, drop in coffee shop, intergenerational activities etc. Childcare is offered for all ages, including playgroups, kindergarten and after school care.

All the services are offered in the setting of the mothers center, as reliable support in everyday chores, creating an animated meeting point in the neighborhood for all generations. The quality of eldercare and childcare has more of a family like than an institutional character in this setting.

Care work is characterised by it's affinity to everyday housework tasks an intimate social relatins. Psychosocial support are at the core of care work as well as physical nurturance and emotional aid. Quality in care services is brought about by personal factors, turst and unwritten rules of authentic caring, uite different to the „easy in easy out“ culture which larger commercial suppliers and market orientation have imported into the area of professional and institutional care provision. Services in the neighborhood context of the Mother Center are close-by, not only in a geographical sense close, but also in an emotional and social sense, involving neighborly contact, communication and support. This appoch also has the advantage of simultaneously pooling the resources and skills of the elderly to contribute to the neighborhoods networks, embedding eldercare in a reciprocal process of neighborly exchange.

The Mother Center 2000 that was built for the Expo 2000 is a whole neighborhood, including the intergenerational Mother Center, housing projects for families and elderly, as well as shops and services that will demonstrate innovative forms of living and working together in communities and family friendly work and neighborhood structures.

The mandate of the Mother Center 2000 is to revive neighborhood networks and community life, creating a place where the elder generation can interact with the youth, where a culture of care and caring, authentic relationships and neighborliness can grow.

This requires innovative architecture, external space designed in a way that allows and promotes different groups in a community to meet and encounter each other and that creates the internal space necessary to develop social and relational skills, for people from different walks of life to build an understanding for each other.

The Mother Center 2000 model is designed in a way that promotes encounters,

communication and community building.

In the 17 years they exist, the Mother Centers and their self help peer group approach have proved to be a school of life for the development of tolerance, conflict resolution, leadership and neighborhood support skills, embedded in the Mother Center female culture of care.

The Mother Center 2000 is designed to allow this process to expand and to involve the community as a whole.

Cultural Values and Political Perspectives in Central and Eastern Europe (Kathrin Wolf)

OWEN's Mission is to work with women who have become marginalised by the enormous changes and transformations in post-socialist societies. Our approach is to provide women with time, space and support to reflect upon their new situation in order to develop their own ideas, strategies, networks and dreams. We also promote dialogues with women's groups in the West and in the South.

OWEN is an initiative of women from East Berlin. We were born and raised in the GDR (German Democratic Republic), our biographies are influenced by the German version of state socialism after the war.

We now belong to the West. Therefore we usually are not invited when women's groups from post-socialist countries meet to reflect their situation. Founding OWEN can be seen as a self-help project to find our identity. We both belong and do not belong to Central and Eastern Europe. The longer we have been trying to build bridges and dialogues, to find ways to work together, the more we have understood the importance to perceive what is different, what separates us and to find out what cooperation can mean on that basis. Women in post socialist countries have experienced an intense cultural shock due to incredible structural changes in their societies that came suddenly and expected of them to wipe out their personal history and previous experiences.

The high level of education and qualification of women in formerly socialist countries in Central and Eastern Europe has been degraded and devalued. Extensive job experience is nowadays seen as a sign of being too old, inflexible, not market oriented. Women from socialist countries developed an expectation to have full time jobs their whole lives. This is very different from Western societies

We had children, had full time jobs and did political work nowadays sometimes I wonder how we ever managed. What we are trying to do with OWEN is to retrace our own biographies and collectively reflect on them. Where did we allow ourselves to be totally exploited? In what way did the emancipation ideology fit well into the system: requiring women to take responsibility for others (the workplace, the husband, the children) up to the point of self sacrifice all in the name of being strong emancipated women. We have never been able to define for our own what we see as our role as women, as mothers, what we define as attractive, feminine and of social value.

Women in Central and Eastern Europe (not to forget the women from East Germany) have gone from one evil to the next. They have not had time to ask for themselves who they are and what they really want. There is no social space in contemporary society for this. Women need to claim time and space for this. This involves support systems and social structures that maintain existential and social security. Otherwise women are easy prey for the new masters of the market, who prescribe what is feminine, attractive and motherly, and what role models to follow in bringing up sons and daughters.

Structural Experiences

In our discussions with women from other Central and East European countries we often hear the word mentality and the phrase: you don't understand that that is our mentality.

In the beginning when I heard that, I pulled back respectfully. Now I have developed a different attitude. Before I was full of awe and also a bit envious, because I could not take pride in any such thing as a German mentality. Now I have become rather suspicious of this mentality concept.

One example is the issue of power. When we speak in our trainings of the social structures creating women's powerlessness we have noticed that women have negative associations and negative reactions to the word power. If this is called our mentality we can never get beyond that. If however we openly analyse our different experiences in the East and in the West, we could come to new integrated concepts and understandings. Take the issue of women and money for instance, (which is also connected to power), when women in the West say we need to access the public channels of money and make transparent where money is being spent in order to question and renegotiate how public money is being spent then this becomes a very different issue in the context of the East where the flow of public money is extremely un-transparent.

Working together on this issue, bringing in both the experiences of the East and the West on the issues of money and power could create new concepts and new strategies. Women in the East have very negative experiences with hierarchy and power, so they have developed submissive strategies in dealing with it. When we come from the West, we are seen as powerful, resourceful and influential, so it is very difficult to create an open climate and direct communication.

Having come from a life-long experience of subservience it is very difficult for women from post-socialist countries to take their own needs and experiences seriously and to become actors in their own right, defending their own interests. There are often self destructive tendencies involved: (I am not good enough, we can't accomplish anything, we are too insignificant) and also negative attitudes towards other women: (I don't like to work with women, women are ineffective, competitive etc.). There is very little analysis of where this powerlessness comes from and who really is to blame. Women coming from the West should be very careful when putting out their concepts and ideas in encounters with women from the East, who come from a different background, have different experiences and approach these dialogues and encounters with different attitudes.

Cultural experiences

I will never forget the time a woman from Lithuania stood up at an international congress and exclaimed, I hate all Russians. We German women felt paralysed, the numerous Russian participants were silent and after a short period of shock the conference went on as if nothing had happened. I promised myself I would never let anything like that ever happen again. So now we begin every OWEN course with an inter-cultural dialogue.

What had actually happened at that conference?

The woman from Lithuania had expressed, what many were thinking: The Russians suppressed us for decades, we were not allowed to speak our language, our religion was

forbidden. Now is the time to take revenge. And coming from Germany, a country which is responsible for the holocaust, for killing Jews, homosexuals and gypsies, do we have the right to tell this woman from Lithuania how she should feel or behave?

Is for her the step from forced friendship to open hostility, a step on the way for her own liberation and emancipation? How should ethnic and culture differences be acknowledged without creating a breeding ground for crude power plays? Although this is somewhat scary for Germans ñ taking into account the national cultural and ethnic heritage of Central and Eastern European countries as a starting point to develop identities and projects could be a valid strategy. What is needed in any case is a conscious and open debate on these issues.

NGO's have sprung up like mushrooms in all post-socialist countries. Many have organised around issues and concepts defined by Western funders. This has not contributed to the development of a self-confident civil society in these countries defining their own needs and strategies. Rather a climate of competitiveness has developed, where NGO's compete with each other for Western funders, for western money and information. Often this is conducted unofficially, behind the scenes. Competition for money and paid employment substitutes an open debate on visions and strategies to build a strong basis for a functioning democracy and a vibrant civil society.

The tendency to name women's projects in Ukraine and Russia Mothers Centers (in the hope of receiving attention, partner support, resources and funding in so doing) is an example of this.

Women in the East are very proud of their high qualifications and high level of education, even if the new economy has heavily degraded their qualifications. This represents a wide field of resources, which are not being accessed by the new system.

We should focus our dialogues on how to access this hidden treasure, how to define our own interests and visions even if they are deviant from mainstream culture, how to value our own experiences even if public opinion tends to want to erase this part of history. It is very encouraging that the Mother Centers are seeking this dialogue and creating a space for this to happen. It is up to us all to make use of such occasions.

Mother Centers in the Czech Republic

(Rut Kolinskà, Jitka Herrmannova)

The first Mother Center in the Czech Republic was founded in 1992 in Prague, following a Mother Center workshop conducted by two German Mother Center activists in the fall of 1991. The workshop was sponsored by the German foundation Heinrich Boell Stiftung 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 the issues how to strengthen family life and how to build a stable civil society in their country.

Hearing about the model of Mother Centers from a Czech journalist living in Germany, they requested a workshop to be conducted for their members and 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 in the 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 73 Mother Centers and Mother Center initiatives, both in urban and rural areas in the Czech Republic.

For anyone familiar with the situation in post socialist countries this is truly amazing, because grassroots and self-help initiatives from the bottom up due to the suppression of community organising and civil society during the communist regime are very rare in post socialist societies.

The economic conditions in the Czech Republic are somewhat more favourable for such a development than in 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 in the countries of the former Soviet Union.

The majority of mothers in the Czech Republic make use of the parental leave scheme, which is provided for four years, including a small monthly family payment.

Staying at home on parental leave while the children are small is considered by many as a conscious decision against the devaluation of the family under the communist regime and against the socialist uniform role model of full participation on the labour market for all.

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

- - After the experience of the "collectivization" of child rearing under communism, which in the Czech Republic was seen by a large part of the population as being imposed on them, there is a keen interest on the part of parents to consciously take charge of parenting themselves and to 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 switch board 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 new governance.

Activities in the centers include play groups, discussion groups, breast feeding groups, language courses, courses on ecology in the household and on alternative health care, as well as family support services like a toy library, a 2nd hand shop, family excursions etc.

Rooms for the centers are negotiated with local government or with NGO's and other institutions like churches or the YMCA, some funding is obtained from foundations like the Foundation for the Development of Civil Society.

Mother Centers have impact on many levels. They influence the quality of parenting and child socialisation as well as the quality of family relations. They revitalise neighborhood

and community networks as well as bringing a grassroot partner to local governance. They empower the women involved to take charge of their own lives as well as developing an arena for leadership skills to be discovered, developed and transferred to the community at large.

The Czech Mother Centers - How they Happened

(Rut Kolinskà)

The idea of Mother Centers was brought to the Czech Republic by Alena Wagnerová, a Czech writer, living since 1969 in Germany.

It happened like this: it was the Twelfth Night, January 6th 1990, and I and my husband, together with all of our then 4 children went through the centre of Prague singing and begging the passers by for money for the Jedlicka Institution (an institution for handicapped children). And it was then, when we met Alena for the first time.

She asked me whether I knew anything about the Prague Mothers. And I answered that I was one of the women belonging to that movement. Next day she came to our place and told us about the Mother Centers in Germany.

I liked the idea very much and I said that it would be wonderful to have something like this in our country, too. Prague Mothers were mostly involved with environmental problems.

After a year I was again visited by Alena Wagnerová. She arranged for an excursion to Munich. There I met among others also Monika Jaeckel and I became inspired by the community of Mother Centers.

Being who I am, a well brought up daughter of a protestant pastor, I felt obliged to start doing "something" to repay my debt. In the autumn of 1991 Prague Mothers in cooperation with Heinrich Boell Foundation organised a workshop about the Mother Centers where Monika Jaeckel and Hildegard Schooss gave their presentations.

In March 1992 the Prague Mothers initiated the establishment of the first Mother Center in YMCA Prague which has become a model center for all the next centers in our republic. Now we have more than 73 such centers in the Czech Republic.

It was not easy at all to accomplish this. We were not taken seriously at the beginning by the authorities, neither by the media. Mothers and children do not represent an interesting issue for the media. Not having enough experience of our own, we came up with the idea of translating the German publication: Mothers in the Center - Mothers Center. We translated the book and distributed it to the places where mothers are likely to be concentrated, i.e at childrens doctors, social departments of local authorities, libraries etc.

Till now we get reactions of mothers saying that the book is expressing exactly what they themselves feel. The publication is used at the seminars organised every year for those who are interested.

Gradually we have gained some position, however minimal, in our media and thanks to this there is a lot of interest in taking part in these seminars. Let me give one example:

Last year, when we announced the date of the seminar for the beginners, we expected about 40 participants. However, 120 of them turned up.

The seminars are organised by means of self-help, ie. that those having already gained some experience, become mentors of the seminars for the beginners. At the same time

we organise volunteers looking after children while their mothers participate in the seminar.

It is very important to stress the effectiveness of the principle of self-help. It means that the seminars can be organised very cheap and that everyone can afford to participate in one. To participate in one of these seminars is the first step to be taken before establishing a center of this kind.

Every one wishing to establish a center like this has, in accordance with our laws, to establish a "citizen's association" first. Then they have to find a place. This is not easy because everyone (meaning both the owners and municipal authorities) think space and rooms are there to earn some money. No one can understand that to prevent social problems is much cheaper than to solve them later on.

Another difficult problem is to raise money. Those luckier ones receive rent or reductions. But all centers have to be prepared to go on endlessly to write up proposals having about 30% expectation to pass.

There has not been passed the law concerning the tax assignment as yet, that is why it is not easy to address the sponsors. Very often they argue that we do not represent a suitable issue for advertisement. Thus we can rely only on minimal sponsorship.

I have to add that mothers with little children are at the margin of our society. In spite of this or perhaps exactly because of it women are still willing to take up this painful journey towards creating a center. Their award expecting them is the "school of life", that Mother Centers are.

It is important to say at this moment that our young mothers today were brought up in the former regime. Which means they are used to be passive, they are not oriented in politics. They do not know what a citizen's society is, and what a position of a free citizen is. These women suddenly have not only to formulate their demands, but they also have to say them aloud and in public.

Let me give one example:

One of the founders in a small town said:

"I knew it is necessary to go to the election and not to vote for the communists, but what does the community department serve for I did not know. Only when we went to ask for the room for our center have I realised how it all works. I am going to get enrolled in next elections."

Many of the women founders say that when they went to the authorities for the first time they had to go three of them, not to be afraid. The same way the women learn to look after their common interest they learn to respect the interests of others.

Since the very beginning it was the Prague Mothers who have been creating a national network of women and backing up the Mother Center movement. We organise the seminars and two years ago we organised a congress of Mother Centers which was also attended by our German colleagues who still are our dear friends. Together with our German colleagues we are trying to set up a mutual network while exchanging our experience.

We were invited to visit the Mother Centers in Stuttgart to share the German experience. This time the group of mothers was joined by the representatives of the authorities: from the ministries, local government and the labor department. Our German colleagues organised for them to meet their German counterparts and it proved a fruitful experience for both sides.

In February I was in Bucurest where I presented the idea of Mother Centers to women in

Romania. The reactions arising out of a discussion made me believe that the Romanian women appreciate this idea as well.

Personally, I believe that the interests and problems of mothers living in different conditions are basically the same. It may be stated that the community which a Mother Center has to offer makes every mother enthusiastic. It is, however, important for everyone to know that it depends on her to have such a place established.

Sanski Most Bosnia

(Adisa Hotic, Behija Hadzic)

Project Background

Sanski Most is a middle-sized town in Bosnia Herzogowina with 70,000 inhabitants. The population is almost entirely composed of migrants. 34% are migrants re-migrating from Germany, where they were refugees during the war and 55% of the population are refugees from other parts of the former Yugoslavia, who had to leave their homes during and after the war.

The unemployment rate in Sanski Most is over 90%. Due to the war the social structures have been completely destroyed. This leaves especially old people and single mothers without social contacts and family support. These groups have the highest rate of poverty and health problems. Since the canalization and waste disposal systems have broken down health hazards have increased dramatically. Sanski Most has only one health care center. The next available hospital is in Bahic, 120 kilometers away.

The Projects

Fenix and the health care center for women and older persons are two projects working together to provide health to the disadvantaged groups of the population: women, children and the elderly.

Fenix is a project concentrating on pregnancy and motherhood. In Sanski Most there is only one gynecologist. Any surgery needed has to be transferred to the hospital in Bahic, 120 km away.

In this situation a group of young midwives started Fenix, a service for pregnant women and their families.

Fenix offers pre and postnatal care and counseling. Individual consultation and thematic groups focussing not only on the medical aspects of pregnancy and birth, but also on psychological and social issues involved.

Courses and individual consultations include themes such as:

- Pregnancy gymnastics
- Relaxation and breathing techniques
- Information on alternative methods of child birth
- Breast feeding
- Marital and family conflicts
- Child care and child rearing
- Unwanted pregnancies
- Disabled and handicapped children
- Birth complications
- Preventive health care for mothers and children
- Sexuality

Fenix also offers home support. 10 days after birth the families are visited daily in their homes, and if needed this period of home visits is extended. 24 hours a day a telephone hot line is maintained for any problems or issues should they arise.

The main mission of Fenix is to provide a contact point for women where they can turn to and find a listening ear and a helping hand. Fenix wants to increase the level of information on pregnancy, birth and family health issues both for families as well as for professionals in the medical and social work professions.

The Health Care Center for Women and Older People

This project is a cooperation between Fenix and the Maltese Foreign Services. Its aim is to create a meeting point in the community, especially for single mothers and the elderly.

Consultation and neighborhood services are planned to support the everyday lives of the most vulnerable groups in the community. A social laundry (offering laundry services with payments on a sliding scale) is part of the project as well as meal services, child care, after school programs, counseling on legal as well as psychological and social issues and home-help, escort and health services for the elderly.

With this project which we want to further develop into a mother and community center like the Mother Center 2000, we want to create both job opportunities for women as well as support and services for the most vulnerable groups in society. We want to help create a meeting and melting point in the community for groups with different ethnic background.

Women's Housing Advisory Commissions (VAC) - Made in Holland

(Lilly Hutjes)

The Women's Advisory Committees (VAC's) are residential consumer organizations that make an important contribution towards the quality and sustainability of housing and the residential environment. Construction plans are scrutinized and promoters advised by expert volunteers.

Women spend a lot of time at home. To them the home is a restaurant, a laundry, a church, a hospital, a working place, a hotel, all at the same time. That is why women want to have a say in how houses are built, they want houses to have a flexible design and to respond to the complex daily needs of the woman of the house.

Men usually leave the house in the morning to go to work and don't return until the evening. They don't see what happens during the day in the house. For women the home is their working space. They are everyday experts on how homes should be built to fit the activities happening there. However, in the majority of cases it is not women, but men who are the architects and city planners and who build our houses and design our communities.

VAC started some 50 years ago after the war in Holland, when women felt that that they had important contributions to make to the reconstruction of housing and communities after the war. They have since spread throughout Holland and are currently represented in one third of Dutch communities.

VAC stands for (in English) Women's Advisory Committee for Housing Construction; it is a residential consumer organization, which is active within a municipality or region. A

VAC consists of women of different political and social backgrounds. The number of members per VAC varies from 5 persons in a small community to 15 in a larger one.

The main activities of the VAC's are the assessment of plans for dwellings and the residential environment (land use plans, traffic plans, etc.), and giving advice on them. In this connection, the VAC's form part of construction and planning teams and maintain regular dialogue with the local authorities, builders and housing associations.

The organization of autonomous VAC's now comprises a national network, spread over 280 municipalities and supported by a central office in Utrecht.

Physical structures, how you build houses and plan cities can stimulate social relationships and social neighborhoods or they can hinder them.

The VAC has put together a list of criteria that foster community friendly architecture, that include qualities like accessibility, safety, sustainability, easy to clean, healthy, comfortable.

These criteria also apply to neighborhoods, neighborhoods have to be socially safe, facilities have to be nearby and easily accessible, the environment needs to be healthy.

VAC makes evaluations of construction plans on the basis of these criteria.

VAC also gives training courses throughout the country to enable women to look at and understand construction plans and to learn how to enter their housing needs and ideas into planning processes.

VAC has been very successful in Holland. There has been legislation passed obliging publicly funded housing construction to incorporate consultations with VAC groups. VAC has also developed a quality seal that improves the sellings prospects of private construction companies, if they are able to claim to have obtained the VAC quality siegel.

6 Grassroots Women's Stories

The example of IRAV

(Irina Borodina)

I am a teacher and worked 10 years in a school. Later I taught students at the Technical University in Moskow. While I was writing my dissertation my son had an accident and is very ill since then. He could not speak anymore and his development is retarded. I became depressed and continued to ask myself: Why my child?

I lost contact with all my friends, I did not want people to pity me. The relationship to my husband almost broke. When I was pregnant with my second son it was a very difficult time, because we were both still under shock at what had happened to our first son. It was a very difficult time for us to live through.

When our second son was born I was still so depressed that I rather wanted to die, so I neglected my second son. Things kept going downhill until at one point I came to the decision that things could not continue like this, that we had to find a way to live normally again. I needed someone to help me with my son, to be there for him as well

as for me. I wanted to give my son a normal life again. We started working with him, singing him songs, going to doctors. He had 3 operations. We tried to help him by doing a special kind of tongue massage. He did not talk for 8 years.

During the time we were trying to help my son, we started to support each other and help each other in the family, my marriage improved again. We learned to talk about our worries, our feelings. Then I realised that if mutual support worked in the family it could also work in the neighborhood. That is when the idea was born to create a self help initiative for parents of handicapped children. To help them to come back into the community and public life with their handicapped children, to have a normal life. My husband and my family supported me on this. We created a network of families and undertook many things together with our handicapped children, taking walks together in the park, organising games and festivities.

Now we have expanded to helping all families in the different districts. The district authorities give us rooms where we can organise events. Everyone who consults us is asked to fill in a questionnaire, where they describe their qualities and talents. And everyone contributes what they are best at.

Since I have become active I understand for what I am alive. Much has changed in my life. I can talk quietly with my husband about all problems concerning our handicapped son, we have stopped blaming each other and ourselves. My two other sons can speak quite openly now about their handicapped brother, they are not ashamed of him. On the contrary they do a lot together with him.

Parents with handicapped children need to be able to participate in regular activities with their children. We organise concerts, Christmas parties in the neighborhood, outings to historical Russian sites, and events where many families participate, not only those who have handicapped children. We invite social workers to our events, so they can see what the parents and the children can do.

We do everything on a voluntary basis. Even supplying the snacks and coffee at our events. This ultimately goes beyond our resources, so it is important for us to find some kind of funding and financial support for our work. This is something we are not good at.

We work together with schools, churches and the local district authorities. We think the next step for us is to find space for our parents and our neighbors for all to meet. We would like to include into such a community center also elderly people, who are often very isolated. We are trying to negotiate such a project with our politicians now. We invite them to our events and show them our work. The problem however is that politicians seem to think that there are no funds for this kind of work.

We get some money for some of our events to cover expenses and we have been able to access a sewing machine, a washing machine and products to make cakes etc, and some very little money to give to our voluntary helpers. Mainly we raise funds by organising flea markets and selling handicrafts. We also have a bartering system between the families that helps save money.

Our group has a very strong morale. We encourage each other to have self confidence, to find the strength in themselves to go on. Every woman should wake up with the thought: 'What good deed can I do today to make my life better and to help someone

who has an even more difficult lot than me.†

Our strength is that we encourage women to see that they have talents and competencies to contribute and that we have created a network of families in our districts that is reaching out to the whole district. Everybody is enjoying our family events and slowly a community is developing.

We start first in helping our families with their family life. If everything works well in the family then you can participate actively in public life.

The example of Charkov

(Inna Lazaruk and Irina Kuzmina)

For us women in Charkov it was a big challenge to create a self help initiative. At some point we realised that life would not become better if we just sat at home and hoped for change. We realised that politicians would not solve our problems for us. So at some point we had the idea that we needed to start ourselves. We spoke to women in our neighborhood and we participated in a course conducted by OWEN on self help. We learned very much in this course.

At first we were 4 women meeting in the evenings. Later we organised parties for children and excursions for the families in our neighborhood. We wanted to interest women this way in our initiative. Communication played a central role in this process.

You need a lot of time to build an initiative like this. The problem is that the people in our neighborhood live in a very isolated way. There are no movie theatres anymore, they were closed down, many are unemployed, they sit depressed at home. There are no courses or retraining programs. Many people have lost hope in the future. It is very difficult to persuade such people that they should not lose all hope, that they should not be passive.

Our local politicians praise our work, but we do not receive any support or funding. That does not make it easier to be convincing to other people that it is worth while to become active. Our only successes we have to show have been the support and relationships we have built with each other. This however has been a strong process. But it is very difficult to carry on on a purely voluntary basis for long. We are all poor and struggling with survival. People need jobs to take care of their families. And in addition to all the housework that needs to be done there is very little time for voluntary work.

We are still lacking basic resources like a room to meet, funds to pay for the rent of a meeting place, as well as communication machines like a fax or a telephone. It is some years now that we have not received any support and we find our spirits dwindling. But we have not given up. A new project we want to start with Owen is our intercultural dialogues. We want to show that our differences can be our strong points and that if we understand the different cultures we are coming from it will be easier to build bridges between different ethnic and cultural backgrounds.

Being active has changed our life. We look at the world with different eyes. We see things that we did not see before. We are not being heard yet by politicians but we believe that the time will come where we are heard and seen. We believe that we can help people and that we can achieve a lot if we work together.

What people need in our society is a place where they are welcomed as they are. Where they can feel free to show themselves and their fears and worries as well as their talents and dreams. What we need to be building and this is something we saw is true for the other countries too is

the capacity of people to bond with each other, to support and encourage each other. We have accomplished this a little bit in our neighborhood and this is what is keeping us going.

7) Transfer and Replicability - Analysis of Mother Center Questionnaire

(Monika Jaeckel)

The German Mother Centers have spread across the borders into Austria, Italy, Holland, Switzerland, The Netherlands and the Czech Republic.

At this workshop we asked the participating groups if and in what way the Mother Centers make sense for the countries and communities they are coming from, and if the concept is valid also for post-socialist countries. One session of the workshop was dedicated to debate this question, in addition we asked the groups to fill out a questionnaire.

The response was enthusiastic and affirmative.

The Mother Center concept was welcomed for the following reasons:

- Women need a place to meet in their neighborhood
- Children need a place to meet other children
- Places to develop neighborhood contacts and support networks are needed
- Places to exchange information and knowledge on peer level are needed on issues like child-rearing, job opportunities, family issues, housing problems, legal issues etc (Community Switch Board)
- Places are needed to support family finances and family management with projects like Second Hand Shop, Trading Center for Toys, Cheap Lunches, Babysitter Referral etc.
- Places are needed including childcare where women can receive job reorientation and training (computer courses, micro credit programs etc)
- Places are needed to learn alternative health care methods (baby massage, healthy nutrition, meditation etc)
- Places are needed where parents can gather to lobby for their interests in the community (childcare, safety of neighborhoods, environment and ecology, family policy measures like parental leave, family friendly housing etc.)
- Places are needed where 3 generations can meet and develop contacts without being relatives.

- Places are needed that explicitly extend support to mothers, places where mothers feel seen and acknowledged.
- Places are needed where women can experiment and try out new paths.
- Places are needed that validate mothers and home makers equally to women in the labor market.

In Bosnia Herzogowina, Mother Centers were seen as an answer to the extreme isolation many families and especially single parenting families are experiencing, due to the fact that families and communities have been torn apart by the war.

In a situation where the social fabric of our society has been torn apart, where unemployment is the rule and employment the exception, where poverty and ill-health is wide spread you need to reweave social networks just as much as you need to rebuild the houses and the infrastructure of our cities, which have been destroyed. Foreign aid programs usually only concentrate on building up the cities, but I think that is a mistake.

There was quite a strong sense of being able to find motivated women back home who would be interested in setting up a Mother Center.

Barriers and obstacles were seen mainly in the lack of resources: funding, and rooms, but also in bringing mothers from different ethnic backgrounds together and in prejudices towards single mothers.

Differences that were seen compared to the German situation included:

The need to address the situation of children living in inadequate conditions, a stronger need to include for profit activities, due to lack of other funding sources and the need to mix grassroots and professional (entrepreneur) activities, in order to reach larger target groups as well as create a larger scope of jobs for the Mother Center women.

8 Temperature Reading and Leadership Support Method

The following methods used in the GWIA 1999 workshop were developed by the National Congress of Neighborhood Women (NCNW) , USA, a partner organisation of the German Mother Centers.

Temperature Reading

A good method to start the day and access the mood, the "temperature" of the workshop. The following questions are asked the group by a facilitator. Do not spend more than 3-4 minutes on each question, then move on to the next. Ask the participants to come to the front and face the group when making their contributions. Make sure that problems are always presented together with recommendations of how to solve them.

- 1) Appreciations
What people or happenings during this event would you like to appreciate?
- 2) Puzzles
Are there any open questions, puzzles or confusions you would like to address?

- Is any information needed, is there a misunderstanding that needs clearing?
- 3) Problems with recommendations
Any problems to be noted? What recommendation would you have for addressing the difficulty?
- 4) Wishes
Are there any wishes or ideas? Any future-oriented suggestions?

Leadership Support Method

The leadership support method was developed by the NCNW to develop the leadership qualities of neighborhood women, who often play an important role in neighborhoods, but lack formal qualifications.

The method is based on a set of questions that can be adapted to any subject and are answered by every participant. Every participant has the same time to answer each question. The questions are designed in a way that bring out resources and counteract negative thinking. Women learn to be part of the solution. The concluding questions point to self initiative as well as to the importance of initiating support systems.

The following are the set of questions used at the GWIA 1999 workshop:

Block 1:

- What are your first impressions (about Germany, about the Mother Centers, about the Workshop)?
- What do you find inspiring?
- What do you find irritating or difficult?
- What could be a support for you?

Block 2:

- What does neighborhood mean for me?
- What are my positive, what are my negative experiences with neighborhood?
- What could be my next steps to change something in my neighborhood and where could I find support for this?

Block 3: (Self reflective):

- What effect have the debates had on me so far?
- Is there anything blocking my participation at the moment?
- What could I do to get over such a block?
- What would be a help for me for the rest of the workshop?
- Is there anything I would like to ensure before the workshop is over?
- What can be my contribution to making this happen and what would be something that could support me in this?