

## Mothers as Movers and Shakers: The Network of Mother Centres in the Czech Republic

By Suranjana Gupta

What began in 1992 as a small group of mothers trying to counter their isolation as parents and find ways to collectively care for their children outside their homes, is today a sophisticated women's civil society movement. These women are demonstrating how childcare and motherhood, traditionally considered to be in the private domain, can be brought into the public sphere to create public recognition of women's contribution to the social fabric of society. In the last fifteen years, the Czech mothers have gone from one Mother Centre in Prague to organizing a nation-wide network of over 250 Mother Centres that meet the practical needs of families with young children, while collectively working on a broader set of values that demonstrate why and how Czech society must become 'family friendly'. This vision positions the Network of Mother Centres in the Czech Republic in an advisory role to the national Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, as well as to the European Union, in debates on equal opportunity programs and on inclusive, "family friendly" social policy. The Czech Mother Centres Network is 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.

### The Context

The fall of communism brought with it several new feminist organizations in the Czech Republic. Informed primarily by feminist ideologies of the United States and Western Europe, this 'Western feminism' conveyed to grassroots women that much of their oppression was rooted in their care-giving roles in the family (Kolinska, 2008). Some of this was attributed by scholars as the "misunderstandings between what are termed 'Western feminists' and women in the post Communist countries" (See Ferber and Raabe, 2003). Empowerment appeared to be associated with participation in the workforce – rather than changes in gender relations in the family or private sphere. The workplace was positioned as the key sphere in which women could become political actors and renegotiate their status. For Czech women, this perspective was rather unappealing. Motherhood was considered to be an integral part of womanhood; rather than seeing work and family in opposition to one another, women in the Czech Republic saw their participation in the workforce as a key element of their family responsibilities (Weiner 2005, Raabe 1998).

To some extent, the socialist state was pronatalist, and hence supported women to reconcile

their productive and reproductive roles through provisions such as paid maternity leave, kindergartens and benefits for families with young children. Social security provisions for women under socialism also enabled women to join the workforce even though their access to employment was not on the same terms as men (See Weiner, 2005.) With the transition to a market economy, women workers who were also mothers were particularly hard hit by the loss of social security or *socialni jistota*, and so "motherhood becomes the grounds for their exclusion" (Weiner, 2005: 582). In 1995, the Czech Government abolished the universal distribution of family benefits that were formerly provided to all families with dependent children. Previously, a single application after the birth of the child was all that was required for the regular receipt of the allowance. The new policy required citizens to apply for this benefit every three months where their eligibility and allocation would be determined based on family income (ibid. p. 583).

The Czech Mothers movement must be viewed against this backdrop of political and economic transition, in which grassroots women as mothers found themselves marginalized by the dominant feminist movement and impoverished by the transition to capitalism. The Czech Mothers have successfully politicized their roles as caregivers and



## HOW THEY BEGAN

use this as the basis of creating a strong political voice that influences public policy in response to grassroots women's priorities as both mothers and workers.



### 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 to expand the number of members. 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. Alena, a Czech woman who had lived in Germany, persuaded three leaders of the Prague mothers to visit the German Mother Centres in 1991 to explore their grassroots organizing approach.

### Learning From the German Mother Centres

During the 1991 exchange visit with the German Youth Institute (DJI) and five Mother Centres 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 and 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 three public, community based 'mother centres' where they could collectively work out ways to look after their children as well as devote time to their own growth and development. A book documenting their experiences, strategies and lessons learned,<sup>1</sup> offered mothers of young children a simple concept and practical ideas on how to organize. In turn this led to the emergence of a self-help movement of more than 400 centres in Germany. In a short time, through peer learning and exchange, the movement spread to neighbouring countries in Europe.<sup>2</sup>

During their tour, the Prague mothers saw that the Mother Centres 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 centre was unique –reflecting the needs, talents, interests and capacities of the local women who ran them. Some centres offered sewing classes and repair services as ways of lowering household expenses and supplementing incomes; others organized parenting skills training, counselling support services, and holistic health activities.



### Initiating and Scaling-Up Mother Centres

Inspired by the German Mother Centres, the Prague Mothers started their first Mother Centre in 1992 in a YMCA room in Prague. This became a social space for women that allowed them to collectively fulfil their care-giving roles. Women were drawn to this public space organized by mothers where both groups of women and children could spend time together.

Klara Rulikova, one of the founding leaders of the Mother Centre remembers,

---

1. Originally published in German in 1985, 'Mutter im Zentrum: Mutterzentrum,' English version, "Jackel, M, A. Laux, and G. Bryant (eds) "Mothers in the Center: Mother Centers", commissioned by GROOTS International 2002, available at [www.mine.cc](http://www.mine.cc).

2. See Jaeckel, M. (Undated document) "The Story of the Mother Centers in Germany" MINE, available at [www.mine.cc](http://www.mine.cc).



*“For me the Mother Centre was somewhere I could take my children and meet other mothers and their children... I visited the centre 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 Centre, 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 centres. The Czech women had seen in Germany that the Mother Centres had a window that looked onto the street. Similarly, the first Mother Centre in Prague also had a window that looked onto the street, and thus 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, another founding leader of the Czech Mother Centres. Women began to use posters, pamphlets and letters to publicize their work. They also translated and adapted the Handbook of the German Mother Centres to disseminate their ideas. From the letters of inquiry they received, mothers would gather the addresses of women and organize workshops for them to learn how to start their own centres. Newspaper articles that listed Rut Kolinska’s address led many mothers to her home to learn how to set up their own centres.

Monika Jaeckel, one of the early leaders of the German Mothers Centres movement, has documented numerous accounts of how women across the country learned about the Mother Centres through other women while shopping or visiting hospitals, through posters, or through radio programs, and were inspired to identify spaces and negotiate with local authorities or businesses to create similar centres in their own communities.<sup>3</sup> One such account is given below:

*“I come from a small community with 3000 inhabitants. ...I had heard about the Mother Centres from a radio program and had written to Prague and received the brochure about Mother Centres... When I realized that these rooms in the kindergarten were not being used I spoke*

*to some of my friends about starting a Mother Centre 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 centres we also have activities for the older children, for the kindergarten and school children from the childcare services in our building. They like to come to us to play. In the evenings we have programs for the whole family. Especially popular are our family parties.”(Jaeckel, 2006: 4)*

During this initial phase of expansion, a key factor in the development of the Czech Mother Centres was their participation in the German Mother Centres’ Congresses in 1993 and 1996, where the entire network of German mothers came together to celebrate their accomplishments, reaffirm their goals, and plan for the future (Kolinska, 2006:1). The Congresses highlighted the importance of having a consolidated formal network with a common vision, as well as the support of the local and national governments.

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

Ironically, it was the absence of the German official who had initially accepted the invitation to attend the Congress that led to a barrage of media coverage on the Czech Mother Centres. 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.

3. See Jaeckel, M. (2006) ‘The Mother Centers in the Czech Republic’ MINE, 2006, available at [www.mine.cc](http://www.mine.cc).





## Centres of Empowerment and Change

By bringing childcare and mothering into the public arena, the Mother Centres were making visible the ways in which existing policies and practices leave mothers socially and economically marginalized and isolated. In addition, by creating platforms that enable “ordinary” women to participate in public decision-making processes, they were empowering women to act as citizens and agents of change. Over the next few years, a loose network of Mother Centres was established.

This network created a common platform for women across villages, towns and cities to support, mentor, and teach one another how to run centres. The empowerment of women in these centres came from the common experiences of initiating and managing the centres and voicing concerns that resonated with mothers across the country. Mothers began by locating other like-minded women, and together, they would identify and claim public spaces (rooms in municipal buildings, unused kindergartens, offices of construction contractors) where they could run their centres. They 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 centres. In some cases, municipalities would provide the space, and in others, they would rent it to the centres, in which case parents would pay a small fee for attending classes run by the centre.

As the individual centres 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 centres; they also began to voice the ways in which infrastructure development, social and employment policies were needed to support women

to balance parenting with employment or career aspirations. Several mother centre leaders became active in municipal planning processes, within which they lobbied the government to create child-friendly public facilities, policies and working conditions.


The emerging self-confidence and empowerment fostered by the Mother Centres was evident in the ability of women to voice ways in which their efforts were changing how women and children experienced the city (Jaeckel undated: 8). 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 centre gives me a lot of self-confidence in this respect.”*

Others said,

*“the other day a bus driver didn’t want to take us. We were a group of ten mothers 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.”*

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



## Local To Local Dialogue: Collaboration with Local Authorities <sup>4</sup>

The initiating of centres and claiming of space frequently involved educating and gaining the support

---

4. Local to Local Dialogues are locally designed strategies whereby grassroots women’s groups initiate and engage in ongoing dialogue with local authorities to negotiate on a range of development issues to influence policies, plans and programs in ways that address women’s priorities.

See “A Playground for Breznice,” in UNHabitat & Huairou Commission (2004) Local to Local Dialogue: A Grassroots Women’s Perspective on Good Governance. [www.huairou.org/assets/download/UrbanGovToolkit\\_L2L.pdf](http://www.huairou.org/assets/download/UrbanGovToolkit_L2L.pdf)

of local authorities. As the individual centres and the network evolved, the need to partner with local government grew as the women pressed for child-friendly infrastructure, safe neighbourhoods 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>5</sup> The Commission was a response to the needs of grassroots groups to organize 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 women of Breznice, the Czech Mothers used the 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 Centres have continued to organize Local to Local Dialogues and are currently in their fourth year of organizing them. 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 Centre representatives and public officials as they plan and collaboratively implement 'family friendly' public planning and service programs (Schilen, 2007).

The Local to Local and the Roundtable dialogues demonstrated to all parties that women are not just 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 experienced in these

negotiations provides opportunities for women to reflect on, appreciate, and learn from the organizing and relationship-building undertaken by the Mother Centres.

A survey by the Czech Mothers in 2007 of the quality of the relationships between 93 Mother Centres<sup>6</sup> and their local authorities showed that local authorities tended to be more positive than Mother Centres on their partnership, and the two groups had different visions of how to improve things. Mother Centre leaders wanted to have a stronger role in advising the municipalities on family issues and in associated planning, and felt that for the partnership to mature, communication and collaboration needs to be more open, frequent, and stable. Municipalities were more narrowly focused, hoping the Mother Centres would become more involved in local special events and planning as they are 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 Centres 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), the Family-Friendly Campaign was devised to convey to the government that the falling birth-rate in the country was the result of families perceiving children as a burden to their social and economic status. The Campaign sought to draw attention to concrete ways in which the government could demonstrate its support to families through city planning that privileges the safety of women and children, flexible jobs, and child-friendly public facilities and services. The Campaign challenged public and private sectors to actively demonstrate through deeds rather than words, their commitment to supporting families and children in the Czech Republic. Most import-

5. Huairou Commission is a global coalition of grassroots women's networks and partners working on grassroots women's empowerment with a human settlements focus. For more information, see [www.huairou.org](http://www.huairou.org).

6. Presentation by Lucie Slaukova at 15<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Celebration of the Network of Mother Centers, November 30, 2007.

antly, the Campaign brought grassroots women and their roles as mothers into the public sphere, supporting them to advocate on their own behalf, contradicting two dominant trends:

- Grassroots women are usually at the periphery of public policy and decision making; and
- Women's roles as caregivers are either trivialized or made invisible.

The Network of the Czech Mothers received substantial political support coupled with media attention for their Family-Friendly Campaign. For instance, the integration of the Czech Republic into the European Union obliges the government to meet European standards on equal opportunities. The EU Council for Equal Opportunities recognized that the Family-Friendly Campaign of the Czech Mother Centres was promoting innovative and practical ways of advancing equal opportunities in the Czech Republic, pushing the standard beyond the realm of the workplace.

The Family-Friendly Campaign rewarded and recognized public facilities and businesses that create child-friendly spaces, childcare services, and flexible working conditions for mothers. In 2006 Petr Necas, Minister for Labour and Social Affairs, agreed to participate in the Family-Friendly awards ceremony of the Czech Mother Centres. While his presence alone conveyed the national government's support for the efforts of the Mother Centres, his public declaration of the Ministry's support and ambitions to win the family-friendly award made it clear that the ministry was prepared to partner with the Mother Centres.

Minister Petr Necas 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 which will promote 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 Centres. 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 centres, 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?"* (Kolinksa 2006:6)

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

## ■ Formalizing the Network and Negotiating with Government for Legitimacy

The collaborative relationship with the government described above was accomplished after a long struggle on the part of the Mother Centres. The notion of citizens partnering or 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 centres and legitimize the Mother Centres in the eyes of the government, while preserving their unique identity and integrity, compelled the Mother Centres to formalize the network and engage the government.

## ■ Defending the Status of the Mother Centres

In Czechoslovakia before the Velvet Revolution, state-run nurseries and kindergartens provided

women no choice but to leave their children when they went to work. After the Revolution, these institutions were closed. The Government's way of ensuring the wellbeing of pre-school children was through the payment of a family allowance. The family allowance was meant for one parent to stay out of the workforce to take care of children up to 4 years of age. The rules of the allowance prevented families from spending it on childcare services outside the home for more than three days a month. Violating this rule resulted in forfeiting the allowance as the government saw it as payment to parents (virtually always mothers!) to stay at home to take care of young children. But like the German experience, Czech mothers also found themselves socially isolated by their private child-raising responsibilities. Young mothers found it particularly difficult to re-enter the job market (when the allowance ended 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 Centres, the question of their legal status began to arise. In 1997, a complaint filed with the authorities in a small town called Litomy stated that the Mother Centres were in fact childcare facilities, which meant that those using the Centres for more than three days a month were violating the rules governing the family allowance. However, the Mother Centres are not childcare facilities but a space where women collectively fulfill their childcare responsibilities. To have the Centres 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 the government to address this issue. In spite of their efforts, Mother Centre leaders Rut Kolinska and Jitka Hermannova failed to convince the Ministry for Labour and Social Affairs that, on the one hand, the Mother Centres were not a childcare facility, and on the other, that families should be allowed to access childcare services for more than three days a month (Kolinska, 2006: 2-3). The government's stand was that women should stay at home to take care of children since 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.

As a result of the failure of these negotiations, the Czech Mothers realized that educating the authorities was a serious challenge. It also made them conscious of the fact that they had to systematically plan and design their advocacy strategy to address such concerns - including identifying allies who could be strong advocates inside the government, and being well-prepared with their arguments during negotiations. It would take several years of advocacy for the government to amend the law to increase the number of days which families were permitted to use other childcare services from three to five days a month (ibid: 3).

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 Centres. She had always represented or supported individual centres in their negotiations with local authorities, but did not 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 an efficient organization, to protect the interests of the network of Mother Centres". In 1999 at the assembly of all the Mother Centres in the country, Rut Kolinska, Jitka Hermannova and Lucie Slaukova were elected to be part of a three-member governing council. 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, Germany with national and local government officials in 1999. The Czech delegation consisted of fourteen representatives from the Mothers Centres, six local government representatives, the Czech Ambassador of the Ministry of the Interior, and a representative from the Human Rights Department (which is a part of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs). The idea was to expose mothers as well as government officials to the Baden-Wurtemberg regional network

## LINKING WITH OTHER GRASSROOTS WOMEN'S ORGANIZATIONS THROUGH GLOBAL NETWORKS

of the German Mother Centres, which enjoyed the support of local and national governments, and to demonstrate for a genuine partnership between Mother Centres 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 Centre 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 another's point of view... The debates we had not only in the official meetings, but also in the bus ride home and in our respective communities were very enriched by this experience"* (Jaeckel 2006:13).

### Linking with Other Grassroots Women's Organizations through Global Networks

In 1999, the same year as the visit to Germany, the Czech Mother Centres 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 in global networks with similar principles and values served to amplify their message and make women feel part of a larger struggle beyond their own neighbourhood and nation. In addition, leaders of the Czech Mothers saw that linkages and exchanges with members of international networks advanced the credibility and impact of the Czech Mothers in their own country:

*"Our partnership with global networks such as MINE<sup>7</sup>, GROOTS<sup>8</sup>, and 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).

### 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 Centres were pre-occupied with running their individual centres. It took time for them to fully understand the critical importance of a formal network as a platform both for sharing lessons and experiences, as well as for influencing national and city policies and programs.

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

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

7. Mother Center International Network for Empowerment.

8. GROOTS (Grassroots Organization Operating Together in Sisterhood) International.



Today the Governing Council (Presidium) comprises a President and four Vice-Presidents, all elected by Mother Centres, with each Centre having one vote. There is also an elected Governing Board (Kontrol Komise) that is accountable to the Governing Council for all its actions.

The Governing Council implements its activities through the following working committees:

- **Expansion/ Scale-Up Committee:** Consists of Mother Centre leaders;
- **PR/Lobbying Committee:** Also consists of Mother Centre leaders;
- **Regional coordinators:** Consists of staff;<sup>9</sup>
- **Financial Committee:** While also made up of staff, under this committee there is also a fund-raising group made up of volunteers from the Mother Centres;
- **Administration:** Also made up of staff.

Through its different campaigns (Family-Friendly Societies, Living with Prams,<sup>10</sup> Local-to-Local Dialogues, and 'My Daddy Rocks'), the Network of Mother Centres currently focuses on the following issues:

1. **Bringing parenting and child-rearing into the public domain** by recognizing and making visible the social contribution women make when raising children, and ensuring that women are not physically and socially isolated while parenting.
2. **Creating dialogue mechanisms that enable citizen-government engagement and collaboration.** This means creating spaces where women can come together, collectively analyze concerns, and develop solutions that they can implement jointly with the government.
3. **Promoting new forms of community development and infrastructure** that reflect the needs of families with children.

In addition, the Network of Mother Centres received support from the Bernard Van Leer Foun-

ation to undertake regional organizing work from 2004 – 2008.<sup>11</sup> They hired regional coordinators to create sub-networks for learning and advocacy with regional governments.

## International Recognition

Rut Kolinska received the European Woman of the Year Award in 2002, which 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 Centres. The award and the publicity that followed provided a platform to communicate why the Mother Centres matter and how they are working to empower women and children and improve the lives of families. By 2003, the Network had grown to about 135 centres.

In 2005, Rut Kolinska was also awarded the Social Entrepreneur of the Year award, publicly recognizing her for the innovative work of the Network of Czech Mother Centres in empowering mothers with young children to develop a self-help, civil society movement.

## Impacts and Insights

1. **A Vibrant and Expanding Network with a Common Vision of Change** - The 252 Mother Centres currently federated and formalized as a network across villages, towns and cities of the Czech Republic constitutes a movement with a shared identity, clearly articulated principles and values, and a shared political and social vision of the changes they want to bring about. The many Mother Centres can thus act in unison, aggregate their impact, and steadily press local authorities, government, and businesses to operate in ways that address their concerns. The rapidly expanding network indicates the large number of women across the country that are eager to run centres through voluntary efforts, claim public spaces, and sign up to the

9. MCs are required to network, collaborate and function regionally in order to negotiate with regional governments

10. Pram is another word for stroller or baby carriage.

11. Funding for 2006-2008 was granted for 18 months.

priorities, principles and values represented by the Network of Mother Centres in the Czech Republic. Of the 252 Mothers Centres that are currently members of the Network, 70 signed up in the last year alone, indicating a growing momentum. The efforts of the Mother Centres have created spaces for women to undertake childcare collectively, access child-friendly infrastructure in their neighbourhoods, and influence legislation on social policy. Significantly, in 2007, the national government amended the law on allowances to permit families to use childcare facilities for five days a month.

2. **Mothers as Agents of Change** - Through peer support, mentoring, and linkages, the Network of Mother Centres brings together women who advocate for their rights as citizens. These are ordinary women who are empowered to negotiate for public space, finance and equal opportunities; to organize centres and manage their activities; engage in self-help, dialogue with government officials; and seek systems that respect and respond to family priorities. This helps 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 priorities 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.
3. **Building Democracy, Influencing Policy and Learning Citizenship** - In the post-communist Czech Republic, the Mother Centres represents a pioneering civil society initiative that is bottom-up and home-grown, two unusual qualities in the transition period. Platforms for civic engagement were new to citizens and government officials alike, and the Mother Centres 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 national and local government who are openly supportive of

the Network's agenda and are taking concrete steps to modify corresponding social policies by promoting flexible job creation and accrediting mothers to provide childcare services for payment. In addition, as of this year, the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs will officially endorse the Family-Friendly Awards.

4. **Political Impact:** At the 15<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebration of the Czech Mothers in 2007, the Minister of Labour and Social Affairs illustrated the impact of the network's awareness raising and advocacy work in the following remarks:

*"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 Centre contradicts both the workplace-driven priorities of the new capitalist system and state-run childcare services that displaced recognition for women's contribution as parents. At the same time, the Mother Centres redefine women's traditional identity as housewife and mother by highlighting the social and economic value of their contributions and by bringing these roles and responsibilities into public, collective spaces where women can share, rework and socially validate them. By creating a network of scale and impact, women can now tell members of the private sector, government, and other men how they want to balance their employment and career aspirations with family and children. Women are now able to articulate the economic and political resources and support needed for them to realize their aspirations.

In his congratulatory message to the Mother Centres on their 15<sup>th</sup> anniversary, ex-President Vaclav Havel drew attention to the fact that they represent solidarity and value based efforts in a rapidly commercializing world. His statement highlights the fact that the Mother Centres have

carved out a very special place for themselves that is built on 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.

5. **Redefining Equal Opportunity:** The focus of European Union policies on equal opportunity has been advancing non-discriminatory practices in the workplace. In this context, the Mother Centres movement has propelled a bottom-up discussion of what constitutes 'equal opportunity,' pointing out that it involves much more than workplace issues. They have put family-friendly priorities on the social and political agenda and encouraged diverse, multiple perspectives.

## Lessons for Feminist Organizing and Movements

1. **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 care for 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 Centres (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 they have on policymakers.
2. **"Family-Oriented" vs. "Feminist" Organization** - Women involved with the Mother Centres don't necessarily see it as a movement. They have different associations with this concept and do not describe their organizing or work in this way. When asked, some saw Greenpeace and the Velvet Revolution as a movement. This may be because women generally don't perceive themselves as having the potential to create a movement and because of the way in which they define 'movements.' Mother Centre leaders also point out that many
- members of the women's movement do 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 by feminists as oppressive. The Mother Centres differentiate themselves from "feminist" organizations by identifying themselves as "family-oriented" organizations, thus emphasizing their need to integrate women's roles as caregivers and workers. 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 see themselves as working for the "empowerment of mothers."
3. **Breaking New Ground for the Women's Movement** - Mothers organizing around child rearing and public support for families with young children, have, by creating a large constituency, reclaimed and reframed issues, thus countering the power of the right wing, conservative forces who thrive on organizing around 'respecting and protecting the family' invariably in exclusionary, patriarchal ways. The majority of working class and poor women value their roles as mothers and wives and see their family as central to their identities. As a grassroots women's movement, the 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 behaviour; 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.
4. **A Different Kind of Consciousness-raising** - The Mother Centres 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 'professionals') who can articulate and demonstrate the value of their unpaid work, and 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 Centres movement is thus

breaking critical new ground that the feminist movement has not been able to tap.

 References

Ferber, M.A. and Raabe, P.H.(2003) 'Women in the Czech Republic: Feminism, Czech Style' International Journal of Politics, Culture and Society, Volume 16, No. 3, Spring 2003 pp 407-430.

Jaeckel, M. "Mother Centres in the Czech Republic: Case Study" MINE, 2006. [www.mine.cc](http://www.mine.cc)

Kolinska, R (2001) 'Report of the Network of Mother Centres in Czech Republic' 2001

Kolinska, R. "Removing Barriers: History of Lobbying Approaches of the Network of Mother Centres in the Czech Republic" GROOTS International and Huairou Commission, 2007. [www.huairou.org](http://www.huairou.org)

Kolinska, R. 2008: personal communication.

Raabe, P.H.(1998) 'Women, Work and Family in the Czech Republic – and comparisons with the West' Community, Work and Family, Volume 1, Number 2, 1998.

Schilen, S. "Fifteenth Anniversary Celebrations of the Czech Mother Centres" December 2007. [www.groots.org](http://www.groots.org)

UNHabitat 2004: Local to Local Dialogue: A Grassroots Women's Perspective on Governance."

Weiner, E.S. (2005) 'No (Wo)Man's Land: The Post-Socialist Purgatory of Czech Female Factory Workers' Social Problems, Volume 52, Issue 4, pp. 572-592.

### Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Rut Kolinska, founder and leader of the Czech Mother Centres, for taking the time to help me understand the vision, history and strategies of the Network of Mother Centres in the Czech Republic; Monika Jaeckel of MINE, whose work on the German and Czech Mother Centres I have drawn upon; and Sandy Schilen, Global Facilitator of GROOTS International, for her insights, analysis and guidance.

## Timeline

### Network of Mother Centres in the Czech Republic

- 1988** Prague Mothers Group initiated
- 1989** Velvet Revolution
- 1991** Prague Mothers visit German Mother Centres in Munich
- 1992** Founding of the first Czech Mother Centre in Prague
- 1993** Czech mothers attend the Congress of German Mother Centres in Stuttgart
- 1996** Czech Mothers attend Congress of German Mother Centres
- 1997** First Congress of Czech Mother Centres in Prague in which women from 27 Centres came together.  
Leaders of Czech Mother Centres are compelled to engage the National Ministry of Labour to defend the legal status of the Mother Centres.  
This leads to the realization that the Czech mothers need to consolidate and formalize the network and its leadership as well as develop an advocacy strategy.
- 1999** Study tour of Czech officials and Mother Centres to Germany to learn about the Baden Wuttenberg network and collaboration between the Mother Centres and government.  
The assembly of Czech mothers calls for registering the Mother Centres as an independent network distinct from the Prague Mothers.
- 2001** Decision in the national meeting to formalize the network.  
Czech Mother Centres initiate the Local to Local Dialogue process as part of a global governance initiative of the Huairou Commission.
- 2002** 10 year anniversary of the Mother Centres  
By now there are 135 Mother Centres in the network who elect a Governing Council of three women.  
Rut Kolinska is awarded the European Woman of the Year by the Schwab Foundation.  
UNHabitat's Dubai Best Practice and Local Leadership Award to the Mother Centre International Network of which Czech Mother Centres is a member.
- 2004** Family-Friendly Campaign launched by Czech Mother Centres.  
Government declares the Year of the Family in the Czech Republic
- 2007** 15<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Network of Mother Centres in the Czech Republic is celebrated by 252 Mother Centres.

The National Minister for Labour and Family Affairs announces that from 2008 the Government will jointly endorse Family-Friendly Awards given by the Czech Mother Centres.