



# Our Spaces

GRASSROOTS WOMEN FORMALIZE  
THEIR LEADERSHIP & ACCESS  
TO ESSENTIAL SERVICES



**HUAIROU COMMISSION**  
*Women, Homes & Community*

Ayşe Yönder  
Marnie Tamaki



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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS


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# Introduction

Claiming space is an important yet little discussed strategy in grassroots women's community organizing. The role of grassroots women in the development of their communities is by now widely recognized. Poor women, especially in the global south, carry a triple burden. Their domestic care giving work often expands into community management to compensate for lack of basic services. In addition, women are increasingly involved in cash income-earning activities, but under increasingly insecure and marginal conditions since the 1980s, as a result of economic restructuring policies.<sup>1</sup> Most of the Millennium Development Goals established by the United Nations in 2000 to combat poverty are related to grassroots women's day-to-day care giving work—dealing with poverty and hunger, infant mortality and the spread of diseases, providing for the education of their children, ensuring environmental sustainability—and Goal 3 of the Millennium Declaration directly aims “to empower women and promote equality between women and men.”<sup>2</sup>

Some feminists partly explain the care giving roles of women by the different moral vision, as well as a complex set of strengths, of women compared to men, and how the pursuit of women's own development is interwoven with connection, support, and responsibility for others.<sup>3</sup> Yet gender stereotypes continue to undermine women's care giving role as a natural extension of their reproductive role as a means to rationalize their subordination to men. As a result, there is still reluctance on the part of the governments and international agencies to fully recognize and resource and provide formal roles to grassroots women in their community development efforts.

“Policymakers and development agents are taking too long to recognize the capacity of grassroots women in shaping the world.”

— Esther Mwaura-Muiru, Founder  
and Director, GROOTS Kenya

For grassroots women to upscale their ongoing efforts and realize their vision to improve their communities and their own lives, “opportunities must exist, resources must be available and the institutions of society must legitimize and promote their actions, though not without struggle.”<sup>4</sup> Here we argue that space is a critical resource, and grassroots women's groups need their own independent community spaces to carry out their community development work, and to organize and participate as active citizens in decisions that concern their communities and their lives.

We document a dozen community centers from around the world as practical examples of implementation strategies to meet the Millennium Development Goals. The examples are selected from among members of the Huairou Commission and GROOTS International, some of whom have organized under the Mother Center International Network. As members of these international networks of grassroots women's organizations, the groups share the common value and principle that grassroots women have the leadership capacity and creative energy to improve their own lives. With some technical support and greater participation in decision-making, they can strengthen their contributions to the society. Therefore, the most important shared feature of all the centers documented here is that they are “owned” and run by organized groups of grassroots women. They are spaces where the women have full control over in order to sustain and formalize their work, rather than just a physical shelter operated by a social service agency.

The purpose of this booklet is to explore how “owning” such local public spaces contributes to grassroots groups' organizing efforts, strengthens their group identity and political visibility, and formalizes their leadership in local governance. Our purpose is to draw lessons from the experiences of these women's groups for other groups.

## Introduction

The case studies are organized around three general questions:

- Why do the women's groups need such public spaces? How do they use them?
- How do the women come together to claim these community spaces in different contexts, and how can their needs and approaches to secure and maintain access to such spaces change over time?
- What are the constraints and obstacles faced in obtaining and sustaining the space? And more specifically, what are the issues and advantages of owning, leasing or renting the space in different social, economic, political, and institutional contexts?

### Women and Space: From Home Spaces to Claiming Public Roles and Spaces

Claiming physical space is a common organizing strategy for disenfranchised groups, but especially for women, it is a transformative process towards claiming public roles. This can range from giving new meanings and power to mundane, everyday spaces, occupying existing public spaces, to creating new spaces.<sup>5</sup> By organizing, we refer here to the more conscious efforts to participate in (or resist) public decisions that affect women's lives, rather than to women's everyday arrangements to share the burdens of their work and networking behind the scene to organize the social affairs in their communities. The boundary between the two is, however, rather blurred.

Women have always found ways to get together in order to share their work, exchange information, support each other, manage the social and economic relations in their communities and shape their environments. However, until rather recently, western trained development experts and researchers have often failed to grasp the contributions women make to the functioning of society.<sup>6</sup> Similarly, F. Ertug argues—in an analysis of rural communities in Anatolia—that male researchers have often dismissed the complex and multi-dimensional arrangements of women as “organized anarchy” since they could

not find the hierarchical structure they were looking for.<sup>7</sup> She discusses the invisible boundaries that village women function in that extend well beyond the walls of their homes or the jurisdiction of the village. In most parts of the world, for poor women, walking to fetch water from the river or from public fountains has been the only time and space to meet and talk with other women away from household chores and responsibilities.

This has been true even under the most oppressive conditions. J. M. Vlach describes how even though slave owners set up rigid rules to control their plantations, they did not have absolute control over them. Slaves found ways to reconfigure and redefine the buildings and spaces to which they were confined in order “to blunt some of the harsh edges of slavery's brutality.”<sup>8</sup> In cities, fetching water was an opening for slave women to exchange critical information. bell hooks argues that even marginal spaces can be places of radical possibility and resistance. She describes the black women's creation of nurturing “homeplaces” in white supremacist societies as a form of political resistance, where “black people could... restore [to themselves] the dignity denied to [them] in the public world.”<sup>9</sup>

In societies where women's access to public spaces was limited, the spaces claimed by women as an alternative to men's public spaces—such as rooftop connections—could turn into places of resistance and sources of power. For instance, Celik indicates that during the French colonial rule in Algeria “control over the domestic spaces of the colonized society was particularly important”. The resistance movement from the 1840s on was based mainly in “the gendered traditional Islamic quarters of the Casbah” where the women of Algiers played an important role in the resistance.<sup>10</sup> In Canada and the United States, indigenous women played an important role in nurturing newcomers to cities and took over left over spaces to start up community drop-in centers and claimed spaces within the social service system (Chicago) to formalize this role.<sup>11</sup>

For centuries, women who chose to dedicate themselves to a religious life could thus gain respect and create their own spaces for learning and working together as a community. These spaces, even if subject to the rules and hierarchy of the church, enabled them to escape the restrictions placed on women in the society, such as learning to read and write. It was in these exclusively women's communities that, as early as in the 12th century, feminist scholars and leaders like Hildegard von Bingen could emerge. Especially during the 19th century, nuns started taking active public roles and sharing their spaces with community groups in need, a practice that continues today. Nelson describes how religious nurses were active in the new territories and formed their own hospitals and set the background for the modern hospital system.<sup>12</sup>

Women have appropriated public spaces for economic and social reasons, such as the several "women's markets" in Anatolia where majority of the vendors are women. The women use this opportunity not only to sell their products or herbs they have collected, but also to network with women from other villages for various social arrangements, from marriages to exchange of products. Women have also used central public spaces for communal actions to get across a political message. A well known example is the silent demonstrations under the repressive military dictatorship in Argentina from 1976 to 1983 by the Mothers of the Disappeared. The mothers made their presence felt through in the central Plaza del Mayo by wearing white scarves.<sup>13</sup>

Access to physical space is, symbolically and literally, an important step towards greater social, economic and political roles and visibility for women as active citizens in the public sphere. There are also examples of more concerted efforts to claim a permanent public presence through new buildings and new institutions. At the turn of the 20th century, middle class feminists in Berlin focused on constructing new buildings and institutions exclusively for women, named after and often built by professional

women.<sup>14</sup> These, often monumental, structures included women's clubhouses and dormitories for female students. Similar to the Settlement House movement in Britain and the United States, German feminists created spaces for their working class sisters—even if in an attempt to integrate them into the middle class values. The debate that started between the Settlement House reformers and professionalized social service providers at the end of the 19th century is still an ongoing one. The "Settlement Women" viewed the city as an extension of the home and community and saw the marginalized groups they worked with as neighbors to support and were advocating for decentralized, community based social services, while the professionals, more concerned with the increasing numbers in need, argued for efficiency and expertise in social services provision.<sup>15</sup>

### **Grassroots Women's Community Spaces**

The grassroots women's groups and their centers documented in this booklet are spaces that are all related to grassroots women's empowerment through their multidimensional involvement in improving their communities. They share some key characteristics with each other.

First, all the groups have been created to meet a common practical need or concern. The examples range far and wide from childcare for working mothers in Turkey and Kenya, a healing center for rape and AIDS victims in Uganda, an information center for women farmers in Nicaragua, a communal living room for mothers in Germany and the Czech Republic, a base for savings groups as in Nepal, a community health pharmacy in the Philippines, a center to deal with environmental and public health issues as in India, a shelter for the indigenous women in Canada, a support center for women construction workers in Jamaica, and a disaster recovery center in Sri Lanka. However, even if the groups have started their centers to deal with a primary concern, they

## Introduction

have added new activities, functions, partnerships and rooms over time as new needs emerged in the community. For instance while the Mother Centers in Germany started as a drop in place for mothers to overcome their alienation, soon they added childcare, food cooperative and income generation activities. In Kenya, due to the growing need, in addition to their childcare services, the women's group started providing home-based care to people with AIDS and their children.

Second, these spaces help women get out of their isolation at home or in their communities and/or the strict rules of the work place. At the centers they meet other women, make new friends, have fun, relax, share information, and get involved in different public projects. As they develop a new group identity in the public sphere, they gain confidence and feel empowered in their own private lives.

Third, the spaces physically and emotionally provide a space for women to focus on their work as public citizens. As Virginia Wolf said, "A woman must have money and a room of her own if she is going to write." These communal spaces provide women a base to learn new skills, gain new knowledge and build their leadership capacity, start income generation or community projects, take active roles and make decisions about their communities and families. They provide a physical base to conduct local, regional and international peer learning exchanges.

Last but not least, these spaces have a political and symbolic meaning. They reflect the groups' accomplishments in terms of access to resources, recognition among authorities and in the community, a continuous struggle. They provide a base for them to meet with authorities and the media on their own terms. These public spaces are a way for the groups to formalize their leadership in the community.

### What are the different strategies to claim these community spaces?

Cornwall identifies two types of communal spaces, i.e., "popular" and "invited" spaces. Popular spaces

are places "where people join together, often with others like them, in collective action, self-help initiatives or everyday sociality entry points for realizing more active citizenship... [They are] spaces that are chosen, fashioned and claimed by those at the margins" whereas invited spaces are "spaces into which those who are considered marginal are invited."<sup>16</sup> But as the examples in this handbook indicate, the boundaries between the two can be rather blurred and depends on the context. Some of the case studies would fall into the category of invited spaces started out by charitable organizations (Rwanda) or social welfare agencies (Yellowknife, Aboriginal Mother Centre) or a local or international NGO, especially those established quickly after a disaster has facilitated the formation of these spaces (Nepal, Turkey, Sri Lanka). Yet what gives a space its meaning is the people's activities, practices and relationships housed and formed within it and how people within these spaces use their agency to transform them into their own places to be sustained in the long run.

### From "Our Practices" to "Our Spaces"

This booklet itself can be considered as a byproduct of a process of grassroots women's organizations claiming space in international forums since the 1995 Women's Conference in Beijing (See Appendices A and B). The Huairou Commission gets its name from the district where the grassroots tent was set up to provide a place for women to meet, network and relax as they navigated the large international meeting and started planning for the United Nations Habitat Conference in Istanbul the following year. The Huairou Commission (until then named the Women Homes and Community Super Coalition) presented a continuation of an exhibition that they had organized during the U.N. Habitat Conference in Istanbul in 1996 as an alternative to the official "Best Practices" exhibition. The member groups of the Super Coalition claimed their space at the conference, not only by organizing a

daily women's caucus, organizing or participating in numerous sessions and speaking up at major meetings, but also by appropriating spaces in the NGO building by setting up their own tent in the garden, creating an exhibition on the first floor with a temporary mother's center, and organizing childcare (for the first time at such a meeting).

After Habitat II, the "Our Practices" exhibition was displayed at a few other locations and events in New York, Washington, D.C., and Nairobi. The Huairou Commission continued the process of documenting the work of grassroots women's groups through its "Our Best Practices" campaign in subsequent years, through additional exhibitions, and, finally, at the third World Urban Forum in 2006 in Vancouver, Canada (See Appendix B).

### The Process and Organization

As indicated before, the case studies are selected from among Huairou Commission and GROOTS International members. The information on the case studies is mainly based on the survey conducted in 2006 for the "Our Spaces" exhibit at the third WUF in Vancouver, which was followed up with another survey the following year that gathered more in-depth information for this publication. In addition to follow up conversations by phone, we had the opportunity to conduct on-site interviews with some of the groups. Additional information was compiled from the groups' own documents and websites, as well as from related articles. In this booklet, the cases are organized moving from individual centers towards replicated models. They are color coded according to geographic region. ■

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## Nicaragua

# La Unión de Cooperativas Las Brumas ("The Mists")

**UNIÓN DE COOPERATIVAS DE MUJERES LAS BRUMAS** is a local network of 24 women's land cooperatives established in 1995 that works with women farmers from 45 communities located within the district of Jinotega in the North of Nicaragua. Las Brumas supports women to develop leadership and agricultural skills, gain access to land and economic independence, participate in local governance, change attitudes towards women and help build peace in the region. The Las Brumas office, resource, and training center was completed in 2000.

### MISSION

The mission of Las Brumas is to develop the leadership and agricultural skills of women, change the attitudes towards women's roles in the community, and promote peaceful relations among rural families in areas affected by war, with special attention to children.

### PRIMARY ACTIVITIES AND USERS

Las Brumas works with the member groups on:

- Cooperative ownership, management, and production
- Women's agricultural production and marketing skills
- Gender awareness and leadership development
- Promotion of environmentally sustainable agriculture
- Peace building and safety and security for women and their families
- Youth development

The 1,200 members of the Unión de Cooperativas de Mujeres Las Brumas are farmers living on land within the district of Jinotega's 45 communities. Over 175 women regularly use the center for meetings and trainings. The monthly organizational meetings and trainings bring together 35 representatives from the cooperatives in the countryside who stay at the center during these two-day sessions. The organization acquired a building in order to provide a place for the members who live in the countryside to stay and work together.

### NETWORKS

Unión de Cooperativas de Mujeres Las Brumas is a member of three local and two national networks. These include the Unión de Cooperativas Las Colinas (Union of Cooperatives of the Hills), a federation of four cooperative unions, including Las Brumas, Red de Incidencia (Impact Network) and Red de Promotor de Ecología (Network for Ecological Development), the Coordinación Nacional por el Derecho a la

Women farmers securing  
economic empowerment  
and peace...



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Tierra y la Propiedad a la Mujer Latina (National Coordination for The Right to Land and Property for the Latin American Woman), and Conglomerado de Café (Coffee Conglomerate). Internationally, it is a member of the Huairou Commission and Red Mujeres y Paz-Centroamérica (Women and Peace Network-Central America).

### FUNDING

Las Brumas received \$1,500 from Oxfam Canada to build its center. The women raised the resources for the remaining costs locally, through in-kind contributions and a range of local fundraising initiatives organized from 1996 to 1999.

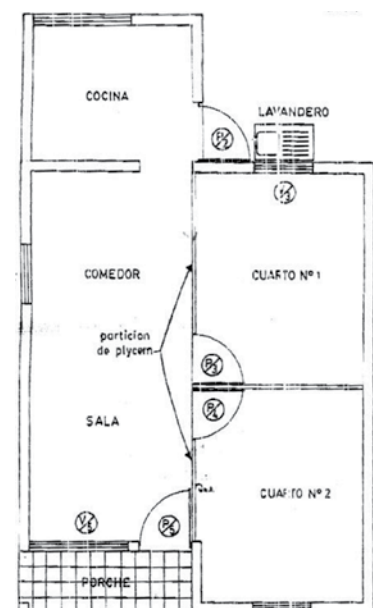
Membership dues barely cover the utility bills. Las Brumas seeks funds for its activities through different sources. For instance, the American Jewish World Service has recently provided support for its capacity-building programs on management, agricultural, and advocacy skills, as well as for maintenance and service costs.

### TENURE, OWNERSHIP, AND MANAGEMENT

Las Brumas owns the land on which the center was built. The space is maintained and run by the President of Las Brumas, Haydee Rodriguez Cerros, and other cooperative members. Las Brumas has a General Assembly and a Board of Directors made up of 30–35 women, with members from each cooperative, an audit committee, and a committee on education and promotion of the cooperatives. There is a building caretaker, and there are often a few members from the countryside staying at the center.

### DESCRIPTION OF SPACE

The center is located in the 20 de Mayo neighborhood of the City of Jinotega. It is a one-story, concrete and cement block construction on a 400-square meter lot (20m x 20m). The facade is painted red and pink, and inside, the rooms have pink plastered walls and tile floors. The building contains an entrance hall, two offices and a kitchen, with a separate front entrance to the annex that leads to the conference room, bedroom, and storage space. The bathroom is outside, behind the building. The building was designed with the participation of the members of Las Brumas and has the capacity to accommodate about 20 women to stay overnight during the monthly meetings or trainings. The conference room can hold about 35 people.



## The Process, Partnerships & Accomplishments

### Background: Conflict and Post-conflict Life for Women in Jinatoga<sup>1</sup>

In the 1990s, in a physically and economically devastated postwar society, women in the Jinotega region of Nicaragua took charge of rebuilding their society and addressing a range of social problems in their community. The war had left women worse off than before. The economy was destroyed, homes and livelihoods were in tatters, and community support networks were broken.

The President of the Union, Haydee Rodriguez Cerros, describes the situation in Jinotega during the war as a “theater of desperation.” Because of its mountainous terrain, the region drew people from other provinces and became a major site of the battles in the war. The majority of the people from the region, including women, left their homes and families to fight. Those women who stayed behind worked their land under the threat of violence, working “with guns on their shoulders.” The war destroyed the basic infrastructure of the economy, knocking down bridges, burning crops, and destroying health care centers, schools, and daycare centers. The war was devastating to families and communities. Many escaped to live as refugees in Honduras or other areas; those in the combat areas saw their families and friends killed, their houses destroyed, and their children raped and kidnapped. Even as Central American heads of state negotiated a ceasefire in 1988 and further accords in 1989, the fighting continued on the ground. Mistrust dominated, and several times the fighting paused only to lapse again into combat. The return to a peaceful way of life has been a protracted process. Many ex-combatants, especially men, still continue to resist relinquishing the positions of power they gained from wartime social norms in which problems were negotiated through the use of arms and force.

When the fighting was over, returning to productive life was hard. As people returned to rebuild their homes, communities and livelihoods, both men and women found it very difficult to reintegrate

themselves into their prior activities in a post-conflict setting. The war had torn communities apart, destroyed many homes, and many people found that their lands had been taken while they were gone. People in the community worried about the returning combatants and often did not trust those who were kidnapped. Women were especially disadvantaged in the postwar conditions. After six or seven years of fighting, many were widowed during the war, and in the continued culture of militarism, men often refused to share domestic and productive responsibilities. Women had to be the primary providers for their families, yet they faced serious barriers both in terms of agricultural production under unequal terms and in caring for their families.

During the Sandinistas’ Agrarian Reform, only men benefited from the land redistribution, furthering the structural gender inequality. Without legal titles to land, a woman could not inherit land and could be left without any assets if her husband abandoned her or sold the land they had worked on together. Widespread illiteracy limited women’s knowledge and ability to demand titles from inheritance or such sales. Most important of all, without land ownership, women also lacked the collateral to get credit to buy seeds and supplies necessary to start the season, because the land women were typically able to own were smaller plots of lower quality. Women who owned livestock typically owned the less profitable sheep and pigs.

The destruction of the infrastructure in Jinotega—roads, bridges, daycare centers, schools, and health centers—also disproportionately burdened women. Because of the difficulty of reaching health centers and lack of adequate staff and medical resources, the health of women and children in the region continued to decline. While schools were being rebuilt, there were fewer options than before, so women had to travel farther to take their children to school. The government daycare centers were not rebuilt, leaving women to make costly arrangements for childcare as they worked. Moreover, they had to

work and take care of their children in a post-conflict culture characterized by machismo, which condoned discriminatory attitudes towards women and even domestic violence.

In 1991, active residents of Jinotega formed a mixed-gender union of cooperatives in order to enhance their access to land, credit, farming tools and implements, and to improve their productive capacity. The organization opened a window of opportunity for people in the region to raise their standard of living. Women were allowed to become full members, paying dues just like the men, but still faced discrimination within the union. While women were asked to volunteer their labor and time, participate in advocacy and demonstrations, they were not allowed to participate in the decision-making processes or in union leadership. Rodriguez, the only woman on a board of nine people, recalls how she was dismissed whenever she voiced women's needs and concerns.

### **Formation of the Women's Cooperatives and the Unión de Mujeres Las Brumas**

To improve their access to resources and create a platform to voice their collective needs, the women decided to separate from the mixed-gender union in 1993 and began organizing women in their communities to form their own cooperatives. Independent women's cooperatives developed new means of access to land, credit, and other resources to improve production. They arranged for collective farming and informal land sharing arrangements to meet the women's needs. From 1995 to 1996, women in cooperatives across Jinotega developed a regional organizational strategy and consolidated their operations in a union of women's cooperatives, which they called "Las Brumas" or "The Mists." Las Brumas is organized in a representative structure, with a 30–35 member Board of Directors that meets regularly with the representatives from each cooperative.

The Unión de Cooperativas Las Brumas provides a formal platform and political structure for women across the region to negotiate with the local government and national institutions for provision of services, i.e., schools, health care centers, water, and latrines. It enables women's cooperatives to participate in trade federations and influence decisions

affecting their agricultural production. For instance, through their participation in the Coffee Conglomerate, Las Brumas could affect decisions regarding organic coffee quality standards, and negotiate with the central government about trade and exportation regulations. The organization has also lobbied to register fifty percent of property rights in the name of women farmers (affiliated with the union) who work on land registered under the name of their husband or a friend. Las Brumas also standardized and consolidated the procedures for administration of cooperatives, and started offering trainings on cooperative management, enhancement of agricultural and business skills, and leadership development for participation in local governance.

### **The Center and Its Activities**

The organization desperately needed a space for its operations. Women began looking for sites in 1995. They initiated a range of fundraising projects in 1996, holding raffles at community events, sewing and selling clothes, and contributing small portions of their incomes from agriculture. In 1999, Las Brumas bought a small piece of land and registered it as an asset of the union. It received \$1,500 from Oxfam Canada, and women from the cooperatives met the remaining costs locally to construct the center.

The members worked collectively on the design and construction process. They decided they needed a large central space that would be used to conduct workshops, trainings and also serve as office space and dining area. The center would also have a kitchen, a porch, a bathroom with two toilets and a shower, and two dormitory-style bedrooms to accommodate women visiting the center. The members also worked on the construction in a highly organized way. Las Brumas hired a construction manager, and each cooperative sent three women to work on the construction. Those unable to do construction work sent money and construction materials, or cooked for the builders. Women in the surrounding community brought their husbands and sons to help. The construction took three months and was completed in 2000.

Las Brumas had started its work by reaching out and building the awareness of women across

## The members worked collectively on the design and construction process.

the region. Many of the challenges faced by women in Jinotega sprang from a lack of awareness about women's rights, the legal requirements for owning property and obtaining credit, and the gender discrimination that blocked women's empowerment in the region. Members reached out to promote cooperative landholding and women-focused economic and political organizations.

The construction of the center and the registration of Las Brumas in 2000 significantly expanded its capacity. The center started to serve as a resource base from which to develop and launch new programs and projects throughout the region. As the union started to offer a variety of programs, ranging from capacity building in agricultural techniques, to trainings on trade development, community-building, governance, and advocacy, the center has become a space for the women to come and stay during the trainings and workshops.

Some of the training programs are held to improve women's ability to implement effective production and management. These include workshops on women's cooperative management and production strategies and leadership development as well as a production model that works fundamentally towards the empowerment women. There are also specific technical trainings, including those in sustainable and organic agriculture, new agricultural technologies, and trade-specific trainings, such as the 2006 workshop for sheep herders.

Las Brumas also runs programs that are designed specifically to change the social norms, attitudes, and practices in the region. These include workshops on challenging gender norms and strategies for women's empowerment through education. A youth program works to create a culture of social inclusion

for youth and make up for the lack of social services programs related to youth education and activities. A peace-building program engages men in community-building workshops that valorize participation and cooperation, and supports community forums that counteract the continued reliance on force.

Las Brumas uses other strategies to promote formal structures that empower women. For example, it requires that women hold land titles to become members, a stricture that usually requires a male spouse to add his wife's name to the title before she can become a member of the union, a privilege that benefits them both. This requirement improves the security of tenure of cooperative members, making them less vulnerable to abandonment and providing them with collateral for credit. Las Brumas promotes joint property titling and literacy programs to support women's ability to understand legal documents.

The members of Las Brumas are active in the political sphere as well. The union runs community workshops on how to participate in municipal governance structures, represents the community in negotiating with local and national governments for service delivery, and participates in the design and implementation of services. It provides updates to its members on legal developments that affect cooperatives, and trains community members on how to affect political change through collective action. It complements its local work by participating in local, national, and regional networks that focus on women's development and property rights, sustainable ecology, and community participation. Las Brumas also advocates directly on behalf of its members on local and national policy issues. Currently, it is negotiating with

the central government to develop a land trust for women and provide women land as credit in-kind. The women would repay the government at a low interest rate over an extended amortization period, and create a community asset that can not be sold but can be inherited by their children.



## Challenges & Plans for the Future



**UNIÓN LAS BRUMAS** has developed an extensive and effective organization in a short time. However, the future of the organization is still tenuous, and it is a continuing challenge to meet the costs of the programs and building maintenance.

The economy of the region is vulnerable, and the precarious circumstances that first led women to form the union still affect the community. Women still face difficulties accessing credit and obtaining basic services. Las Brumas seeks new strategies to provide a resource base to fund women's agriculture, investments, and development. The women's land trust is one such strategy, and it will provide profound opportunities to raise women's productive capacity and standard of living if it is approved. Another strategy pursued involves improving women's marketing methods, both within and beyond the borders of Nicaragua.

The challenge of changing social norms continues. Militarism still permeates local culture, chal-

lenging Las Brumas' participatory collective model of community action. Conflicts erupt between people who belonged to different factions during the war, and in the absence of state institutions, the latent threat of violence persists. Social discrimination against women also persists. However, the organization provides women a formal structure to impact the local and national policies, to negotiate state service provision, and to improve their productive capacity and opportunity to acquire assets.

The center provides a comfortable base for Las Brumas' activities. The members like the space because they have participated in its design and construction and it suits their needs. Even though the Union does not have the resources to afford the construction costs now, the women would like to improve and expand their center. They plan to build offices on a second floor, improve the entrance, expand the conference rooms, and build an annex to the building that includes a training space for children and girls. ■

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<sup>1</sup> This section is based on an interview with Haydee Rodriguez conducted by Matt Wade and Dahlia Goldenberg in 2008.

# Construction Resource and Development Centre Women's Construction Collective

The **WOMEN'S CONSTRUCTION COLLECTIVE (WCC)** of Kingston, Jamaica, is a national non-profit organization that trains and supports low-income women in construction, a non-traditional employment sector for women. The WCC was formed in partnership with the Construction Resource and Development Centre, which provides information, training, and services to the construction industry in general, and which is also the home base for the WCC activities. Women trained by the WCC have become successful in the construction trades and earned respect for women in the industry.

## MISSION

WCC considers itself an empowerment collective with the philosophy that "every woman is a possibility." Its aim is to train and sustain women in construction.

## PRIMARY ACTIVITIES AND USERS

WCC and CRDC's activities are twofold: livelihood development and gender equity in the field of construction. Programs include:

- Technical training workshops in repair and maintenance, carpentry, and basic masonry
- Gender training and peer networking support concerning technical and gender issues in construction
- Jobs placement advertising hub
- Construction industry advocacy for women, encouraging female employment sensitizing industry employers to women's concerns and needs such as equal pay, better on-site facilities, and non-discriminatory hiring practices
- Policy development for the Bureau of Women's Affairs
- Documentation of women in traditionally male roles, including statistics and practices
- Pilot programs to demonstrate women's capacities
- Recreation and social networking
- Preparation of self-help construction pamphlets

CRDC also has a women's housing advice line, which provides technical, legal, and financial assistance for low income women in search of affordable housing solutions.

The center is used as a resource, training and drop in center by members of the Women's Construction Collective.

Women in construction  
gain technical skills and  
well paid jobs



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## NETWORKS

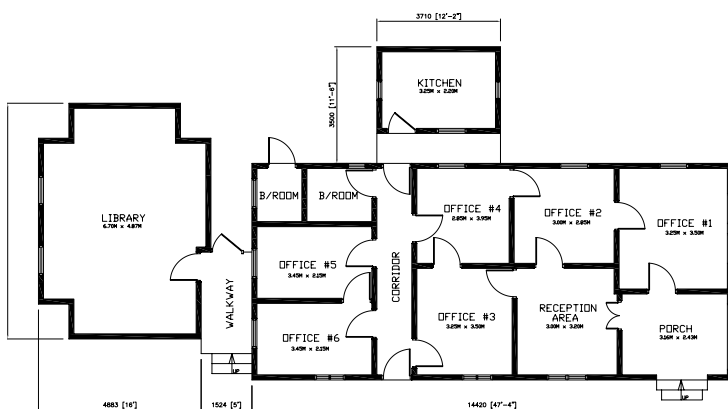
WCC is a member of the Incorporated Masterbuilders Association of Jamaica (IMAJ) and of Women in Construction, and works in several island parishes. Internationally, it is a member of the Huairou Commission and HIC Women and Shelter, both networks that have implemented the WCC training program in the Eastern Caribbean countries of Belize, Guyana, Trinidad and Tobago, and Antigua.

## FUNDING

The CRDC and WCC raised the funding to support their activities and maintain the building by organizing trainings and construction-related services such as job postings and information resources. Additional funding comes from international donors and such activities as renting out office and workshop space in the building.

## TENURE, OWNERSHIP, AND MANAGEMENT

The CRDC owns and manages the freehold property. The Construction Industry Council and the Construction Resource and Development Centre (a board made up of architects and construction professionals, surveyors and engineers) oversee that the training provided by the WCC is following the correct standards.



## DESCRIPTION OF SPACE

The main building is an older, one-story structure of concrete and wood with a new library addition. Construction and renovation was done in the early 1990s. The total area is approximately 7,000 square feet, encompassing eight rooms, plus a kitchen and toilet.



## The Process, Partnerships & Accomplishments

When Ruth McLeod, then Executive Director of the Construction Resource Development Centre, arranged in 1983 for the first ten women to participate in the Vocational Training and Development Institute's five-week course in Basic Masonry, Carpentry, Measurement, and the Use of Tools, few realized that she was starting an avalanche of female involvement in construction.

### Background

The WCC was founded by its partner organization CRDC and its Director Ruth McLeod in 1983 to help low-income women access the booming Jamaican construction industry, which at the time was benefiting from the expansion of the bauxite mining and tourism sectors. The growth of these sectors had resulted in an increase both in infrastructure projects and in factory and residential construction. Women, however, had been effectively excluded from the building industry, not only because it is a non-traditional employment field for women, but also as a result of a new national training policy that focused on all-male trainees in residential construction, providing no accommodation for females.<sup>1</sup> The WCC used innovative strategies to teach construction skills to women and break down gender barriers in a male-dominated employment arena to make it possible for low-income women to attain living wage jobs.

Knowing that women's construction groups tended to disappear when they did not have their own space, CRDC provided a home for the Women's Construction Collective. The WCC registered as an independent nonprofit organization in 1986 and moved to its own offices, which it rented from CRDC. The women from the collective refurbished the office and renovated the CRDC facilities. A carpentry workshop, repair and maintenance business provided rotating employment for the WCC members. By 1988, the collective had helped train more than 144 women.

But in September 1988, Hurricane Gilbert destroyed the WCC facilities. Trainings and workshop activities were suspended. The WCC moved back in with CRDC and restarted some of its activities;

however, without a space of its own large enough to do its work, the WCC's practical training and the road works employment programs lapsed. As a result of this lack of space for training and support in the Gilbert aftermath, there were few women's crews working in construction.

The WCC attempted to secure land for a new center, but the only affordable land was government-owned. Buying government land would compromise the WCC's commitment to remaining unaligned with any particular political party, and jeopardize its ability to work across political lines. Political autonomy was important for the WCC in order to increase the employment opportunities for women in a heavily politicized industry, and to maintain its professional relationships in the face of a shifting administration. This meant that purchase of private land was the only tenable solution.

When the building that the CRDC rented was put on the market, the "for sale" sign constantly reminded the women that they could be forced to pack up and leave their space at any time. Soon after, a WCC member found a derelict building on Lady Musgrave Avenue and proposed that it could be purchased and repaired. With the support of a foundation in the United Kingdom, the CRDC acquired and renovated the current premises along with the WCC. Together, they built a facility that now serves the women in construction, as well as the Jamaican construction industry as a whole.

The women trained by the WCC have gone on to be successful in the construction industry and are building a good reputation and setting precedents for women. WCC members are contractors, supervi-

sors, project managers, tradeswomen, and laborers in Jamaica and abroad. Some women have furthered their education in construction, engineering, project management, and architectural technology, aspiring to masters degrees. Hundreds of rural and urban women have been trained in basic construction skills at the center and have become economically independent in an industry to which they would not otherwise have had access.

The WCC learned many lessons during these years: how analysis of the industry and documentation of their work were essential in laying a foundation for successful programming and funding support; the importance of trainee access to equipment without initial prohibitive cost outlays; to customize training and have adequate time for members to develop skills and confidence; to maintain flexible donor/NGO relationships; and to own and control space for their activities.

The WCC also filled a unique community-based niche. The organization offered free training without prerequisites to low-income women who, in turn, used their training to improve community infrastructure. In Lesterfield, Clarendon, for example, WCC women built an addition to a women's health center and crisis center. WCC trainees in St. Thomas parish worked on community centers. The women have also helped others in their communities with home repairs, such as lock or plumbing problems, not only fixing whatever is broken but also teaching these skills, thereby building human capital in the process of providing service.

To date, the WCC has:

- Trained over 500 women in construction trades
- Maintained a space where women can meet to discuss their progress and problems they experience on the job
- Provided technical support to the construction industry (WCC members are now part of the team used by National Training Agency to conduct assessments)
- Promoted gender equality and economic empowerment of rural and urban women
- Assisted with promotion of women in the construction industry through membership in the Incorporated Masterbuilders Association of Jamaica
- Received awards from the construction industry for their work
- Produced technical publications and trainings for water and sanitation, safe construction practices to mitigate hurricane damage and reducing injuries and deaths
- Provided training in disaster mitigation and community resiliency-building to groups in other countries

### Partnerships and Expansion

On the request of a donor, WCC expanded the scope of its trainings as part of an "Institutional Strengthening of the Women's Construction Collective" project. Rather than focus only on inner city development, WCC was asked to conduct trainings, first throughout the greater Kingston area, and then in rural areas in an attempt to expand the program island-wide. Up until this program expansion, the WCC had strategically focused training within a particular neighborhood, in order to foster a support network and solidarity among community women. It had been their experience that involvement of women from one community at a time offered compounding and visible community benefits that tended to be missing when trainees came from all over the city with no community ties. As entering the construction industry represents a drastic change in the lives of most women, from the long hours that do not correspond with most available childcare and the physically demanding manual labor to the high incidence of sexual harassment and discrimination, a support network was



central to help women meet these challenges. As a secondary benefit, the network set a positive example for other women and girls in the community. But as the project expanded, the city-wide networking became successful, affording the WCC the opportunity to expand beyond partnerships within Kingston and Jamaica and join with international partners.

The WCC was one of four case studies in a 1997 report by UN-Habitat on women in construction and its representatives attended international conferences in Canada, Latin America and the Caribbean. WCC trainees traveled to the U.S. for 10-week ad-

vanced construction training. The WCC also received funding support from international donors, including Christian Aid and the Inter-American Development Bank. Additional international partnerships with OXFAM and the Red Cross International helped WCC members rebuild homes after Hurricane Dean, allowing members to develop expertise in sanitation and hurricane-resistant construction. Through GROOTS International, the WCC and CRDC have conducted peer-training sessions on disaster-proof construction (Honduras) and community mapping and building disaster resilient communities.

"Ownership gives the organization a 'home of its own' and the security of owning the space so even when funding is not optimum, a landlord cannot ask you to vacate." — Carmen Griffith, Director, CRDC

## Challenges & Plans for the Future

The **WCC** is respected and known for quality training and breaking barriers for women in construction for over two decades. WCC members tend to be hired more quickly and earn more than non-members. The WCC allowed women to come into construction in greater numbers, and the trainees themselves changed the image of what women could do by introducing a "higher standard" on a construction site.

After successfully recovering from the loss of their facility to Hurricane Gilbert, the WCC realized that plans for emergency management and owning one's space were essential to sustaining and controlling their work. There were two challenges. First, the fluctuations in the construction industry did not allow a steady source of income. Second, the group's main source of financial support was now from international aid donors who tended to dictate priorities.

In order to meet these challenges, the WCC is now planning social enterprises that will gener-

ate income. One of these would include running a workshop equipped with tools for women to manufacture and sell products, such as furniture. Money from renting out additional space would also assure a steady source of income. The WCC is also examining the viability of becoming an employment agency for women in non-traditional work and is even considering starting its own construction company. These plans are natural extensions of the past successes of the WCC and CRDC, and will require initial start-up funding support.

Fifteen years after the last refurbishment, the center is again in need of major work. There is enough land to expand the building to include a residential component based on the Living Learning Center concept, including a space large enough for a training center for the construction trades, expanding services to include electrical work, plumbing, and welding. ■

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## Nepal

# Pragati Mahila Utthan Savings and Credit Cooperative Ltd.

The **PRAGATI MAHILA UTTHAN SAVINGS AND CREDIT COOPERATIVE** works with women's groups from the squatter settlements in Kathmandu. Women's groups organizing around savings and credit came together after six years of informal cooperation and formally registered as a cooperative in 2002. The cooperative rented a room in a local office building with support from the Kathmandu-based Lumanti Support Group for Shelter, a national non-governmental organization. In 2007, the group moved to its current space, which is larger and more centrally located, providing easier access to its members coming from different settlements. The space provides a safe place for women to conduct their financial transactions, as well as a place to meet, share information, initiate projects, and support each other.

## MISSION

The Pragati Mahila Utthan Savings and Credit Cooperative's mission is to empower landless squatter women through economic self-reliance and income-generating activities in order to reduce women's dependency on moneylenders and to increase the number of women working in leadership positions within their communities.

## PRIMARY ACTIVITIES AND USERS

- Savings and credit
- Income generation
- Capacity-building
- Community development projects, such as management of drainage, construction of toilets, installation of taps

Approximately 495 grassroots women from different squatter settlements in Kathmandu use the center. The women come from ten communities—Balaju, Kumaristhan, Sangam Tole, Dhikure, Khadipakha, Hattigauda, Chandole, Dhumbarahi, Khadga Bhadrakali and Ranibari—located in four adjoining wards of Kathmandu Municipality.

## NETWORKS

The cooperative networks locally and has participated in peer learning exchanges with the Women Cooperative Ltd in Kathmandu, the Viccu Savings and Credit Cooperative Ltd, Gaidakot in Nawalparasi, and internationally, with the Women's Bank in Sri Lanka, SSP in India, as well as in Kenya, Bangladesh, and Bangkok. On advocacy issues, women from the savings groups work with the Nepal Mahila Ekta Samaj, a federation of women's groups spread across 15 districts. The Cooperative, though the Lumanti Support Group for Shelter, is also affiliated with the Huairou Commission.

Savings and credit to support women's livelihoods and community development



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“We don’t need much, just our own space.”

### FUNDING

Initially, Pragati Mahila Utthan Savings and Credit Cooperative received financial support from the Lumanti Support Group for Shelter to rent a room in a local office building and pay for its basic administrative costs. Now, eight years later, the cooperative has an annual operating budget of about US \$2,000. The rent for the space, staff salaries, stationery and other operating costs are paid through the group’s profits and fees paid by cooperative members. According to Sushila, the cooperative manager, they can now easily cover the rent (2,800 Nepalese rupees per month including tax) through the cooperative’s profits.

### TENURE, OWNERSHIP, AND MANAGEMENT

The room is rented from a private landowner, but the space is collectively owned by the 495 members of the cooperative who use the space. Two paid staff members and one volunteer manage the daily operations and space. A steering committee of nine women work in three sub-committees focusing on issues related to accounting, loan mobilization, and education.

### DESCRIPTION OF SPACE

The space is a large room on the top floor of a four-story brick and reinforced concrete building on a busy commercial street. The group shares the toilets with other tenants in the building. The landlord offers them another room—free of charge—for large meetings.

## The Process, Partnerships & Accomplishments

### Background

Kathmandu, the capital city of Nepal, is known as a city of temples. Traditionally, the temples provided shelter to the poor and new comers to the city. With rapid rates of urbanization in the 1960s, accelerating since the 1980s, poor migrants from rural areas had to find shelter by squatting on marginal lands along the riverbanks or steep slopes throughout the city.<sup>1</sup> In 2007, the city's estimated 50,000 squatters (Skumbasis) were living in poverty and without access to adequate infrastructure services in over 66 squatter settlements in Kathmandu.<sup>2</sup> The settlements are also vulnerable to disasters—earthquakes, flooding, and landslides. Limited access to clean drinking water and poor sanitation, health, and hygiene conditions in the settlements affect especially children and women who try to take care of their families under very difficult living conditions.

In 1993, a group of individuals involved in welfare and awareness raising initiatives in the squatter settlements in Kathmandu started the Lumanti Support Group for Shelter, a national non-governmental organization.<sup>3</sup> Lumanti's mission is to enhance the socio-economic and shelter conditions of the poor in urban areas. The group supports the residents of squatter settlements in organizing their community groups, and works with them on initiatives that range from housing and settlement improvement projects, saving and credit activities, water, health, hygiene and sanitation interventions. Lumanti also organizes education and trainings programs, conducts research and documentation, and is involved in advocacy, together with the grassroots groups, on urban poverty, health, and housing issues.

Lumanti partners with eighteen savings and loan Cooperatives based on the belief that: "... saving money is a key tool in empowering and developing poor urban communities... Community-managed micro finance is an alternative means to build assets and to access loans, while building solidarity among community members. Savings and credit groups provide access to support networks through which

problems can be faced and women's bargaining power within the household, community and state can be increased."<sup>4</sup>

### The Cooperative

Pragati Mahila Uthhan Savings and Credit Cooperative Ltd. is one of several grassroots women's Cooperatives partnering with Lumanti. It was formed by the savings groups that started organizing in squatter settlements in 1996. The savings groups have enabled women to come out of their homes and discuss their problems related to their families and communities. Before joining the groups, most of the women were deprived of an opportunity to come out of their homes and speak up in public about their problems so their problems remained untold and hidden. The Cooperative provided a larger platform for women to share and learn about each other's issues, support each other and think of possible solutions.

The Cooperative is primarily owned by its women members from ten squatter communities in Kathmandu. It has a steering committee of nine women who work through three sub-committees to focus on specific issues related to accounting, loan mobilization and education. In addition, the Cooperative employs three of its members as staff—two paid and one volunteer—to manage and conduct day-to-day activities. The two paid staff members are trained by the technical staff of the national NGO, Lumanti Support Group for Shelter.

The Cooperative has developed a range of savings and loan products. Now, the savings mechanisms range from "housing savings [and] children's savings to festival savings and fixed deposits. Loan products, each with different interest rates and repayment periods, include products for paying off other high interest loans, traveling abroad for jobs and buying land for securing housing. For emergencies most members turn to their local savings and credit groups[who always keep a certain amount for emergencies. For larger amounts, they can go to the Cooperative. "The Cooperative has also provided

small grants to different communities to improve community infrastructure and basic services. For example Rs. 8,000 has been given to Chandol community to cover open drains, Rs. 5,000 to Hattigauda for paying for a water connection and Rs. 2,000 each to Khadga Bhadrakali to repair their community building and to Tikuri to construct toilets.”<sup>5</sup>

The Cooperative members have participated in a number of peer learning exchanges locally and abroad, and provided support and guidance to other women’s groups on how to form Cooperatives. Recently they participated in peer exchanges with groups of Birganj, Dharan and Bharatpur, three cities outside Kathmandu. The exchanges provide opportunities for women to learn, share, and motivate each other so that successful programs can be adapted and replicated.

By providing financial services to overcome dependency on moneylenders, support for income generation activities, as well as community facilities projects, the women in the Cooperative have helped each other improve their status in the family and community.

### Formation of the Cooperative’s Center

The group started its activities in 1996, working with grassroots women organized around separate savings and credit groups in their communities. For six years the group operated without an office space, and it was difficult to provide adequate services even to the small start-up membership. In 2002, the groups got together and formally registered as a Cooperative, and it became essential for the larger group to have its own space.

The women in the Cooperative were not only concerned about savings and credit. They also needed a place to come to get information, meet and discuss their common and basic problems when they come to deposit their savings. So sharing the office space with Lumanti Support Group for Shelter was not an option. Because the women’s groups would not feel a sense of ownership. As Maya Gurung, manager of the Cooperative explains, “It is not possible to conduct the saving and credit activities in the community or in Lumanti. The center provides a space that is owned by the women. It was good that

groups were formed in the community but for proper management and formalization of the activities, the transfer of groups into a Cooperative was essential. And for Cooperative management, I cannot imagine it without a suitable and secure space.”<sup>6</sup>

The women decided early on that their space had to be in a location easily accessible for all. If placed in a particular community, it would not be suitable for those residing in other communities. So the Cooperative rented an office at a location close to all ten communities. The activities started in a room furnished with minimal furniture. At the time, the Cooperative was partly supported by Lumanti Support Group for Shelter that paid the Cooperative’s rent. The remaining expenses had to be covered by the Cooperative’s own revenues. The rent of the small room was only 1,500 rupees, but the women had to put up with some difficulties. The room was very small and inadequate for meetings. They had to share the toilets with several other tenants in the building, there wasn’t sufficient water, and the women did not feel secure with the sharing arrangement.

As the Cooperative began to provide credit for the people, the membership began to increase and reached 495 by 2007. The women decided they needed a larger space and a more central location to meet. The Cooperative then moved to its current office space, a little larger and more comfortable than the previous one, and located on a commercial street, easily accessible to all the members. The room is on the second floor. Although there are other offices on the same floor, there is a proper toilet and water facilities. The land owner has been supportive of the group’s good intentions, and has agreed to provide another room (free of charge) whenever there is a large meeting with too many members to fit into the office space. The two staff members are also happy and satisfied with the new office although they feel the space is often inadequate during gatherings and becomes chaotic during the savings collection time. Another inconvenience is that a lot of people come to the office to ask for donations when they learn that it is a Cooperative, and insist even after hearing about its mission.

Today the office space has become an essential base of operations for the organization. Without

this space the savings and credit Cooperative would not be able to conduct its meetings or trainings. It would also be difficult, and dangerous to conduct the range of financial transactions for members

without a safe and secure base. The space is also a means of mobilizing and uniting women, and functions as a center for grassroots women's economic empowerment.

"We are happy that we got this space and we can pay for it on time. But in the long run, we need to get our own space. We have found a roof under which we can share our problems and speak up our mind and thoughts."  
For a long time, we strived for this, our own space, and now that we have it, we have to develop it more; be a model for others."

— Parbati Karki, Chairperson of the Cooperative

## Challenges & Plans for the Future

Though the **PRAGATI MAHILA UTTAHAN SAVINGS AND CREDIT COOPERATIVE** was started by just a few women's groups in the beginning, due to its impressive activities, transparency and clear vision, it has become popular among many women in the communities. Membership has increased and the cooperative has expanded its scope. The office space has become more than a safe and secure place to conduct its financial transactions for the organization; it is also a place for women to come together and share information, participate in trainings and meetings.

The cooperative now has a fund of 50 million rupees (US\$ 72,000). The fund grows as membership continues to increase. Because the women run the cooperative to generate a profit, the organization has its own source of income and can provide various products and services to the members.

However, the group needs long term technical support and more funds to provide parallel services, such as micro development of small enterprises. Ad-

ditionally, the single room space is no longer enough for collecting savings as well as conducting meetings, trainings and discussions in an organized way. The cooperative cannot operate only financial transactions; its ultimate goal is the empowerment of squatter women socially and through greater self-reliance and confidence. So the space serves as a means for organizing and uniting women around their common concerns and interests.

The group aims to be a role model to grassroots women's financial institutions, and to support the expansion of microfinance programs in other districts. The long term plan is to own its building with enough space for the members' meetings that would also have a large room with an open counter for collection of savings. It would be used as office space but will have enough space to hold meetings and capacity building programs initiated by the women on their own. In short, the cooperative's vision is to become a "resource center for grassroots women's economic empowerment." ■

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## Philippines

# DAMPA and "Botika Binhi" Women's Community Pharmacy Outlets

**BOTIKA BINHIS** are community-based and community-run pharmacy outlets in poor urban neighborhoods in Metro Manila that provide cheap medicine and health care to the residents. The first pharmacy was organized in 2003 as a community-based initiative in Patayas, a settlement located near a city garbage dump. With support from DAMPA, the community pharmacy outlets, run mainly by women, spread to 36 communities in the national capital region.

Community pharmacies are only one of many self-help initiatives facilitated by DAMPA, a grassroots organization established in 1995. It is now a federation of 59 urban poor organizations that work with communities, enhancing self-help initiatives, building partnerships with government, and initiating pro-poor legislation in Metro Manila and adjoining cities.<sup>1</sup>

### MISSION

The mission of DAMPA is to become a voice that will develop and advocate for the rights and aspirations of the urban poor. This is based on the group's vision of a society that promotes the development of just and socially responsive communities whose economic, political, and cultural relationships translate into the deepest aspirations of the human spirit. The purpose of community pharmacies is to provide cheap medicine and health services to poor communities.

### PRIMARY ACTIVITIES AND USERS

DAMPA facilitates a range of programs and projects that address the basic needs of the urban poor, including cooperative income generation, security of tenure for land and housing and relocation, health, water and sanitation, gender equity, local governance and democracy, and a local scholarship program to support students enrolled in college. It is also involved in research, advocacy and policy analysis. DAMPA's Botika Binhi community pharmacy program for poor urban communities is one of its several community-driven initiatives, and focuses on:

- Provision of low-cost medicines
- Diagnostics and medical services
- Community organizing to increase the number of women members of community pharmacies

The pharmacy outlets are run by members who live in the community. Each community pharmacy is used by more than 500 clients in the neighborhood. At present, DAMPA partner organizations operate 36 community pharmacy outlets in the Metro Manila region, used by an estimated 50,000 families.

A network of home-based "seed pharmacies" to access to affordable medicine and support women's leadership...



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## NETWORKS

Nationally, DAMPA is a member of the People's Legislative Advocacy Network (PLAN) that works on issues of pro-poor legislation, the Urban Poor Alliance for secure land tenure advocacy, and Samahang Mang-gagawa ng Botika Binhi (SMBB), a wholesale generic drug provider. Internationally, it is a member of the Huairou Commission and GROOTS International.

## FUNDING

Community members supply the capital costs for building the pharmacy outlets. DAMPA, with financial support from Dutch development agency Cordaid, provides training and supports local pharmacy outlets in monitoring costs. The government provides matching funds, when applicable, training and training resources, and facilitates licensing and securing of permits.

## TENURE, OWNERSHIP, AND MANAGEMENT

Since the pharmacies generally operate out of the homes of residents in informal settlements, they lack security of tenure as the rest of the settlement.

The pharmacies are collectively owned and managed by 20-100 members from the community, most of them women. In 2004, 14 out of the 17 outlets had women in charge of running the outlets.<sup>2</sup> Members pay dues of 5-10 Philippine pesos (less than one US dollar) and hold monthly community meetings to make decisions about management, financing, reporting, and auditing. Each pharmacy has a board of a minimum of seven members, including a president, a vice-president, a secretary, a treasurer, and dues collectors.

The pharmacies are open 24 hours a day, all week long, with at least two women trained as pharmacists staffing the place. This is usually the woman who has extended her house to the pharmacy, and another woman who would come to visit. Community pharmacists work on a volunteer basis and do not receive payment for their work.

## DESCRIPTION OF SPACE

The community pharmacies are run out of the homes of the urban poor. The house plans differ, but the modifications to the residence are similar. It requires a simple modification of a small space, usually no more than 10 square meters. The modifications include a sales window and a display cabinet for the medicines, a table for the record book and a drawer for the money. Finally, the room includes such medical equipment as a stethoscope, a blood pressure gauge, and a nebulizer for asthma patients.



## The Process, Partnerships & Accomplishments

### Background

The population of Metro Manila has increased rapidly since the 1960s, almost doubling over the past two decades to 11.5 million people in 2007. A large majority of urban residents—an estimated 5 million people who cannot afford shelter—live in urban poor settlements in poverty and without security of tenure. These informal settlements are located along riverbanks, railroad tracks, in industrial areas or in garbage dumps throughout the Metro Manila area, and are prone to environmental hazards and disasters. As the settlements lack basic infrastructure and community facilities, the residents are faced with serious health problems.

Damayan ng Maralitang Pilipinong Api (DAMPA) emerged as a grassroots organization in December 1995 in response to massive demolitions in Smokey Mountain and other settlements in the Metro Manila region. The demolitions left hundreds of urban poor families in desperate need of adequate basic services and social protection. DAMPA, which the Tagalog dialect refers to a poor person's home, and as an acronym, means "solidarity of poor Filipinos," formally registered as a non governmental organization in 1996. Now with a membership of 17,774 families (representing over 100,000 people), DAMPA aims to contribute viable solutions to basic problems of the urban poor, such as adequate and affordable housing, evictions and relocation issues, provision of basic services, and literacy and livelihood development. Because of its colonial history, the Philippines is still a patriarchal society, and women in urban areas have to work, either to support the family income or as single parents, in addition to their traditional role as primary care givers of the family. Therefore, DAMPA has decided to develop specific responses to the problems of women, children and the elderly, and to increase leadership roles of women in all its activities.

The Philippines does not provide free hospitalization or medical care to the poor, and most residents in informal settlements face serious illnesses,

including easily treatable diseases like tuberculosis and asthma, but have no access to affordable health care or medicine. Therefore, DAMPA community leaders decided to address this serious issue by developing a sustainable, community-based, women-led model.

### The First Pharmacy in Patayas<sup>3</sup>

The first community pharmacy was organized in 2003 in Patayas, a settlement of approximately 700,000 people located in a Metro Manila garbage dump site. Small community meetings that DAMPA facilitated revealed that most residents were concerned and desperate about economic and health issues. Many people in the community had tuberculosis but did not receive any treatment. The discussions led the community members to decide that they would share their meager resources to start a medicine outlet to make cheap medication readily available in the community. They thought they could operate the pharmacy from the one of their homes and manage it themselves. So they converted a small, 10-square meter room in a woman's home into a pharmacy space by adding a window and a medicine counter. Thirty-six community members managed to pool a start-up fund of 720 Philippine pesos (about \$13) to purchase their first batch of medicine.

Meanwhile, in order for the community to access affordable and effective generic medicine and trainings, DAMPA began partnering with Samahang Manggagawa ng Botika Binhi (SMBB), a non-governmental organization. SMBB provided the first trainings to community pharmacists on how to diagnose diseases and to prescribe appropriate drugs so that they could get accreditation. After completing the necessary paperwork, the group decided to call itself Samahan ng Kababaihan, which means "seed pharmacy".

In the first four months, the community pharmacy in Patayas operated smoothly, catering to the medication needs of its members. However, as members

started to take the drugs out on credit, the pharmacy could not collect money, and this threatened the sustainability of the initiative. The members met and developed a new policy on loans, and transferred the outlet to a widow who had gone through the training. But after a few months, the group started to lose money again. This time, it was the emergency hospitalization of the new manager, who, unable to work because of her worsening tuberculosis, was left with no choice but to use the community pharmacy money to pay her hospital bills. The members met with DAMPA and decided it was not morally right to blame or pressure her to immediately return the money. There were two broader developments that had simultaneously led to this problem. The first was the decision of the Department of Health to regulate the sale of prescription drugs, such as antibiotics and TB medication. Unable to afford the salary of a professional pharmacist required for dispensing such medication, the community pharmacies could no longer carry such drugs. The other was the abrupt withdrawal from Payatas of the “German Doctors,” a private, non-profit organization catering specifically to the medication needs of TB patients, the group where the widow used to get her tuberculosis medication.

The local seed pharmacy officers resolved to help the widow and other members like her, and brought the problem to the General Assembly of DAMPA Community Pharmacy representatives. They were able to get medicine for the members with tuberculosis, as well as donations of medicine from the other community pharmacy outlets so that they could continue with their community pharmacy. After a month, the widow started paying back the money she had used in installments, and transferred the outlet to another member. She has already paid

back her loan in full, recovered from tuberculosis, and was able to start a small pig raising business while her children continue with the scavenging work in the Payatas dumpsite.

The community pharmacy in Payatas is now operating with a provision for the controlled loan of medicines, and the pharmacy’s fund has increased from the initial 720 to 4,000 Philippine pesos (US \$72). There are now four community pharmacy outlets operating in Payatas alone, managed by the Kapatiran sa Lupang Pangako (KLP), Group 5 and 6, United Palompon Manila Residents Association Inc. (UMPRAI) and Dumpsite View Neighborhood Association (DVNA).

### Dissemination of the Model

After the success in Patayas, DAMPA organized community pharmacies in 29 other communities in 2003. Most communities chose to use a similar model. The pharmacy is set up with a start-up fund collected by members. Because of their investment in the pharmacy, members receive an additional 20 percent discount on the medicines that are already fifty percent cheaper than at commercial drugstores. Most communities now allow loans to community members in order not to deprive them of their health because of the lack of immediate funds.

The community pharmacy operates out of the residence of a community woman, and community members help with the construction to convert a section of the house into a pharmacy outlet. Members pay dues of 5 to 10 Philippine pesos (less than one American dollar). The implementation cost of typical outlet is estimated to be about 1,990 Philippine pesos (US \$36). The pharmacies are open 24 hours a day, all week long, with two trained pharmacists staff-

“Before, when I needed to buy medicines, I had to travel a long distance but now, I can just knock on the door and I can buy medicine any hour of the day. Sometimes I can even loan the medicine and pay for it the following day. You cannot do that with the other [commercial] pharmacies. This is the good thing about having your own pharmacy in the community.”

— Aling Cora, resident, Patayas

ing the place, the woman who owns the house and another member from the community. Community pharmacists work on a volunteer basis.

In each community, between 20 and 100 members, mostly women, own the pharmacy and run it in a participatory way. Members hold monthly informational meetings where decisions are made collectively about the ground rules for management, financing,

reporting, and auditing, as well as about loans to the community. Members elect the leaders and managers of the pharmacy. Each pharmacy has a board of a minimum of seven women, including a president, vice-president, secretary, treasurer, and dues collectors. In short, the pharmacy spaces are organized in the community in a way that integrates women into important decision-making structures.

## Challenges & Plans for the Future

The community pharmacy outlets reached to over 38 communities, and **DAMPA** plans to expand them to 95 both within and outside the Metro Manila region. DAMPA will partner with NGOs who want to create their own community pharmacies, sharing the model and possibly helping with distribution of medicines.

There are, however, some challenges. The first is the high cost of some medicines that are out of the reach of the poor even at wholesale prices, making funding a key problem. Establishing a clear loan system has resolved earlier management problems as well as the affordability issue, since it is often easier for the poor to borrow money and pay back rather than try to save for emergencies. International funding through the Dutch development agency Cordaid has allowed the groups to purchase more medicine and supplies (such as nebulizers for asthma patients and blood pressure gauges to monitor the health of elderly).

To deal with the continuous funding problem, DAMPA continues to seek donors. However, a second challenge is how to maintain the community based model when partnering with a major donor. The members are aware that the sense of ownership can be lost when a donor takes over the management a project. Therefore, DAMPA is looking for donors that are willing to work in an arrangement in which

the community matches the funds and maintains its autonomy in decision making.

DAMPA is also starting the process of becoming a pharmaceutical distributor to enable the groups to buy and distribute generic drugs at wholesale prices. Cutting out the “middle man” NGO would allow DAMPA to provide cheaper medicine to the community pharmacies. It is also asking the government to provide licensed pharmacists from the Department of Health to expand the level of services provided to community members. This will also free up more time for the current volunteer pharmacists to pursue their own livelihoods.

Finally, land tenure is another major challenge. Most of the houses that provide a home to the pharmacies, as the settlements they are located in, lack secure land tenure. When the government decides to resettle communities, the process often begins with demolitions. In the case of possible demolition and resettlement, DAMPA plans to transfer the pharmacy to the site where the community will be resettled, and to ask the government to build a separate building to house it. Having their own space will help to create a perception of professionalism at the pharmacies and reduce the problem of mistrust of pharmacy volunteers. Yet it is a constant struggle. ■

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- <sup>2</sup> DAMPA. “The DAMPA Community Pharmacy Project.” Unpublished Report. p.2.
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## Sri Lanka

# Kanta Ran Arunalu Kendraya Mother and Child Clinic & Women's Resource Centre

The **RAN ARUNALU (GOLDEN RAYS OF DAWN) WOMEN'S CENTER** is located in a poor community affected by the 2004 tsunami disaster. The center, which also houses a maternal health clinic, provides a safe home base for women to come together, organize and participate in the building of their communities. The center provides a physical presence and visibility in the community for women and their activities.

### MISSION

- To increase women's economic empowerment through savings and community financing, non-traditional skills and livelihood development training;
- To encourage greater unity between women and men; and
- To strengthen women's dialogue with the local government, and to increase the capacity of women to advocate and influence decision-making at the local level.

### PRIMARY ACTIVITIES AND USERS

- Savings and credit activities with the Women's Bank, Sri Lanka
- Training for women, girls, school leavers
- Youth sports
- Urban greening and settlement upgrading
- Community organizing and cultural activities
- Participation in local government
- Livelihood development
- Management of the community resource center
- Support to the maternal health clinic

### NETWORKS

RAS is a member of the Women's Bank, Sri Lanka, GROOTS International through GROOTS Sri Lanka and CLAPNET, Community Livelihood Actions Program Network through Sevanatha Urban Resource Centre, Colombo, Sri Lanka.

### FUNDING

The center was built by international governmental aid money and private donations as part of Project Viru Vanitha, which means "strong women." The operation costs are met through the fees the group charges for its programs and activities, rental of space for community and individual events, and small municipal ungrading contracts. The Maternal Health Clinic is funded by the government.

Reducing our vulnerability to future loss...



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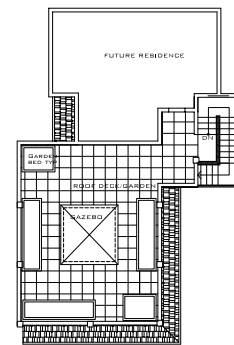
### TENURE, OWNERSHIP, AND MANAGEMENT

The local municipality retains ownership of the land and building. The municipality operates the Maternal Health Clinic on the ground floor, while RAS uses the second floor for its activities. The women can use the waiting room of the Clinic during non-clinic times for community activities. RAS has an agreement with the municipality to manage the building. For that purpose, RAS created a Board to which it elects officers who rotate on a regular basis, allowing all members to have the experience and share the time commitment.

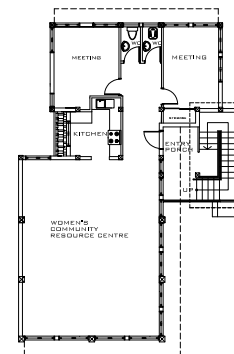
### DESCRIPTION OF SPACE

This is a new, 2,800-square foot (260 square meters) concrete building, constructed to Sri Lankan public building standards on a 3,000-square foot (279 square meters) lot. It has two stories with an accessible roof. The center is located in a densely-packed community with a wood-working shop on one side and a residence on the other.

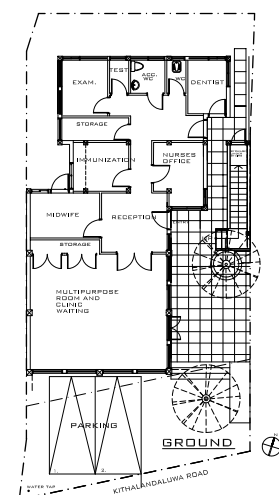
The building was designed with the participation of the women involved and the community health nurses, along with technical representatives from the municipality. The main floor clinic has a large reception and waiting area. The other rooms of the clinic are used for immunization, delivery, and examination, and dentists' and nurses' offices. There are two toilets, one for the public, and the other for urine testing. The main floor opens out to a small outdoor courtyard and green space. The second floor, accessed by a covered exterior stairway, has a large meeting room and three smaller rooms, which are used as meeting and office spaces, along with a kitchen and two washrooms. The roof, with a gazebo and meeting area and planters for growing traditional plants, was built to structurally support a small residence or other program space in the future. The women were most interested in the prospect of a two-story building with a roof capable of being a refuge area in case of flooding.



ROOF



FIRST FLOOR



## The Process, Partnerships & Accomplishments

The tsunami disaster in December 2004 caused extensive coastal damage in Sri Lanka, especially to poor settlements. While over \$2 billion for reconstruction was spent by the Sri Lankan government, the extent of the reconstruction required assistance from the international community. Communication was poor between government, NGOs, local authorities and grassroots communities. Most notably, women were left out of the reconstruction efforts.<sup>1</sup> Moratuwa, with a population of approximately 200,000, is one of the largest urban municipal councils in the Colombo metropolitan region. The majority of the population is poor, living in unauthorized settlements along coastal reservation lands or along the railroad. High land prices and disputes over legal ownership and entitlements have exacerbated the challenge of relocating displaced families after the tsunami disaster.

Samarokoon Watte, where the center is located, is a low-income neighborhood developed on government owned land. The neighborhood lacks proper services, and due to its location on low-lying marshy land, it is subject to severe periodic flooding.

The Viru Vanitha Project was funded by the Canadian government in partnership with local and international NGOs. The Sri Lankan partner, Sevanatha Urban Resource Center, was in charge of the project management, while International Center for Sustainable Cities handled the international project management and urban greening program, and GROOTS International coordinated organizational mentoring, peer exchanges, and building design.

In the initial project discussions, the grassroots women from the community revealed that their most urgent concerns were the high cost of borrowing money, lack of livelihood opportunities, lack of formal recognition of land ownership, and poor infrastructure, as well as social problems, such as use of illegal drugs by the youth. Two strategies were developed. The first was to increase the women's organizational capacity, which led to the forma-

tion of the Ran Arunalu Women's Development Society. The second strategy, claiming public community space for women to conduct their activities, led to the creation of the center in Moratuwa. A second women's resource center and women's society, the Jayashakthi Forum (Victory of Strength), was also initiated in Kasiwatteपुरa, Matara, a smaller community further along the coast.

### Building organizational capacity

The women first participated in a series of community mapping exercises that helped to identify the problem areas in the settlement and provide a basis to include every family in the discussion. A number of savings and credit groups of 10-15 women formed with the help of the local branch of the Women's Bank, and RAS became the first women's group to register as an official community based organization with the municipality. RAS continued with a series of livelihood training sessions, such as mushroom growing, and peer exchanges with other groups in the region. A study tour hosted by Swayan Shikshan Prayog to India enabled the RAS members to meet and observe the work of their peers in Tamil Nadu. There, they learned how the Indian women were involved in the provision of community health services and other livelihood activities, and how they were strengthening their roles in the community.

One of the first initiatives of RAS was upgrading the drainage and the pathways in the community, which regularly backed up, flooding and destroying homes, and, when stagnant, were a breeding ground for malaria-carrying mosquitoes. The women did the work themselves. Later, they negotiated with the municipality to get garbage containers, and composting started in the settlement. Upgrading projects also included urban greening, reclaiming the traditional knowledge of medicinal herbs to provide additional nutrition for the family, as well as helping to stabilize the soil around the houses. The municipality also awarded RAS the contract to manage a home-building grant program.

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**"We were empowered and mobilized the communities to resolve a community problem with the Municipal Council." — Hemali Widana Pathirana, member**

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### Claiming a public community space

The second strategy of the Viru Vanitha Project employed to strengthen community resiliency involved rebuilding the maternal health clinic and adding a second floor for a women's resource center; the old clinic was small and in disrepair. The municipality donated the building and use of the land. The new facility is the home to RAS, the Women's Bank savings and credit groups, as well as to the clinic.

Community members, primarily women from RAS, participated in the building design through a design charrette. This method of collaboration through discussions and agreements allowed the project design team to reconcile the programmatic, spatial, aesthetic, and technical requirements of the women and their key stakeholder partners. The design process served as a public declaration of intention and reinforced accountability of all parties. It was also a quick lesson in the design and construction process for the building. The women first considered the possibility of doing the actual construction of the building, as they already had experience in rebuilding the community infrastructure but decided otherwise, due to the complexity of constructing a concrete two-story public building. They

did, however, monitor the construction progress formally at regular site meetings. Their informal observations throughout the process helped them get a sense of what the potential maintenance and management issues. The center was opened in the fall of 2008, and the women's groups moved in to take over its management and continue their activities from their new space. The center is run by a Board and elected officers who rotate on a regular basis.

The women of Samarakoon Watte took the opportunity during the post-disaster reconstruction period to strengthen their leadership within the community. They made progress in settlement upgrading, highlighted the lack of services, and developed solutions to these problems in partnership with the municipality. The building and their role in managing the center greatly increased their visibility, access to government officials, and therefore to programs and other specific support. RAS was also successful in negotiating for a women's advisory representative on the municipal council. The women's center symbolizes their leadership in the community, and serves as a linkage to the municipality, enabling the women to negotiate around key community issues.



"The experience we gained from the India exchange was used in expanding the membership by the use of training and exchange visits. I also learned how to manage my time efficiently in order to make a contribution to the social work and the well-being of the society without disturbing my day to day household work."

— D.M. Sryiani, member

## Challenges & Plans for the Future



The **RAN ARUNALU WOMEN'S RESOURCE CENTER** is an example of how women's groups can use the post-disaster reconstruction period to access to an important space in the community, and how this can accelerate their organizing process, building women's confidence in their own capacity and leadership.

During the Viru Vanitha Project period, RAS was supported by the local NGO who received funding from the international donor. At the project completion, with the NGO no longer receiving funds, RAS was expected to continue on its own. Two women from the original project staff formed another NGO, Vimenta, to specifically help with women's projects in Southern Sri Lanka, and continue to offer communications support to RAS, primarily for English translation and internet support. RAS keeps a connection with the Indian women's groups facilitated by SSP. The groups meet through regional exchanges supported by the

international GROOTS network.

As the women work for the long-term sustainability of their communities, they plan to continue increasing their membership and expand to other neighborhoods, networking through savings and credit groups. However, they are faced with two challenges to sustain their work and space. The first is security of tenure. Without ownership of the land and building, the women can lose the center if the municipal administration decides to change its policy. The second challenge is maintaining steady funding for its programs and activities. In order to meet this challenge, RAS is planning to expand its network for social enterprise activities, but an additional obstacle is that individuals are not allowed to profit from the use of a Sri Lankan public building. RAS is negotiating with the municipality to be able to sell its products within the center. There is a continual struggle for core funding. ■

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## Rwanda

# The Rwanda Women's Network and The Polyclinic and Village of Hope

The **RWANDA WOMEN'S NETWORK (RWN)** is a national humanitarian NGO that was established in 1997 to provide support to survivors of sexual and gender-based violence across the country. RWN is a network of 22 grassroots organizations and associations dedicated to the improvement of the socio-economic welfare of women and children in Rwanda, recognizing that women and children not only bore the brunt of the genocide, but also remain the most vulnerable, marginalized groups within the civil society. RWN facilitates the women's efforts organized around medical and social service centers. The Polyclinic of Hope and the Village of Hope center are two of these spaces.

The Polyclinic of Hope (POH) was established in the Nyarugenge District of Kigali City in 1995 by Church World Service and Witness USA (CWS-USA), the parent organization of Rwanda Women's Network. POH provides an enabling environment with integrated services for women and children who have been the victims of violence. These services include free medical care, psychosocial support and counselling, trauma counselling, referrals, credit facilities for income generation, and shelter rehabilitation and construction. The Village of Hope (VOH) was built in 2002 in the Gasabo District of Kigali. It serves a community of women that have been the victims of rape and other violent crimes, and is located in the middle of 20 units that house some of these women and their families. In 2005 and 2006, two other centers were opened in the Bugeseva and Buture Districts but without the medical facilities. In 2006, RWN Village of Hope was recognized as a finalist in the Red Ribbon Award for "Community Leadership and Action on AIDS."

### MISSION

The mission of RWN is to promote and improve the socio-economic welfare of women in Rwanda through enhancing their efforts to meet their basic needs. RWN works with these core values:

- Tolerance and co-existence
- Respect for the sanctity of human life
- Honesty, transparency, and accountability
- Gender sensitivity
- Non-partisanship
- Equality and justice
- Commitment to hard work and excellence
- Collaboration with other development agencies
- Environmental friendliness

A public center for healing, hope, and rebuilding lives and communities...



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## PRIMARY ACTIVITIES AND USERS

Over 4,020 women and 504 children—survivors of the 1994 genocide, including widows, orphans and other vulnerable children, and people living with HIV/AIDS—use the centers. The centers provide integrated services in response to the problems and needs of women victims of violence in Rwanda that include:

- Post-conflict response and trauma counseling
- Medical, psycho-social support and home-based care (HIV/AIDS support services through the Home-Based Caregivers Alliance)
- Human and legal rights training, education and awareness programs on issues that affect the women and advocacy
- Skills development (e.g. tailoring, knitting, card making, etc.), socio-economic empowerment and income generation
- Shelter rehabilitation and construction
- Sexual and gender-based violence survivors publications

## NETWORKS

RWN itself is a national network of over 22 grassroots organizations. It is also a core organization of the regional network, GROOTS Africa, and a member of the Huairou Commission, an international coalition of grassroots women's networks.

## FUNDING

The program and operational costs of the Polyclinic of Hope are supported by international and local donors. RWN has the responsibility for securing funding. The land for the Village of Hope was given to RWN by Kigali city and local authorities. The houses were constructed with funding from the United States government, and the center buildings with additional help from the Japanese government, Church World Service, Firelight Foundation (for the children's center), and from individual friends of RWN. The women and youth also contribute in cash and through in-kind arrangements in the running of the center and provision of its services.

These spaces are for sharing, interacting, learning, and building women's capacities in addressing their issues and needs while contributing to solutions. Some of the programs, therefore, involve income generation activities, such as handicrafts and agricultural production. The RWN was allowed to use a piece of public land nearby for women to cultivate for income generation.



### TENURE, OWNERSHIP, AND MANAGEMENT

The Polyclinic of Hope is rented. The Village of Hope buildings belong to RWN. The land for the village was allocated as a gift to RWN by the city of Kigali and local authorities. The residents of the 20 houses hold individual urban authority titles to their houses and pay an annual land fee or property tax.

POH has 13 total full-time staff, from the doctor to the guards. VOH has 6 full time staff plus 1 guard, and the women and youth from the community are also involved in its management. Some, like the home-based caregivers, work as volunteers.

### DESCRIPTION OF SPACE

All are single-story buildings built specifically for the organization's purpose. POH has a large entrance room that is used as a meeting hall, a kitchen and four rooms used as a pharmacy, a doctor's office, a counseling office, and a sewing and knitting room for income generation that is used by the women and children. It also has both a front and a backyard, which is used for meetings. A laboratory located in the back of the center to provide same-day HIV blood analysis tests.

VOH is comprised of two main center buildings, surrounded by 20 units of housing, all of which are now privately owned by women and their families. One of the main centers is U-shaped, with rooms used for meetings, teaching, counseling, and as offices. The other center is one large open studio space that is used by the children and the dance and cultural music activity groups. In the areas around the center the grounds are used for cultivating small crops, including a small thatched hut used by women for growing mushrooms.



## The Process, Partnerships & Accomplishments

### Background

The 1994 genocide in Rwanda devastated the country and significantly worsened the women's situation. Families, homes and infrastructure were destroyed, and hundreds of thousands of people were killed. Those who could escape were relocated, and many were left infected with HIV/AIDS. Rwanda was left with large numbers of widows and orphans, who had suffered the worst violence ranging from rape, torture and mutilation, causing deeply damaging physical and psychological effects on the women and children. After the war, many women escaped to the city to get away from neighbors who had killed their family members or raped them. Sixteen years later,

trauma and stress are still visible due to uncertain housing and living conditions, and increased caregiving roles without employment or financial means. This increased burden often passes unacknowledged and therefore is without support. Re-inventing families in post-genocide Rwanda is critical.

The Rwanda Women Network emerged in this context. It was established by Rwandan women leaders who worked with the Church World Service and Witness USA and who took over the organization and space and upscaled the work. RWN has rehabilitated or helped construct over 280 houses for families of women victims, in Rukara-Umutara and Kigali urban prefectures; provided micro-credit

financing, grants for agriculture and relief aid for returning refugees from Tanzania and the Democratic Republic of Congo; coordinated the mobilization of women and church groups for the peace and reconciliation challenge; trained over 200 women on legal rights and advocacy and 20 women's groups' leaders on HIV/AIDS awareness, prevention and support systems; published the manual, *A Guide To A Holistic Approach In Trauma Counseling In Rwanda: The Polyclinic of Hope Experience*; and received three international awards: Dubai Best Practices Award for Improved Living Environment, UN Rwanda Award, and the Red Ribbon Award.<sup>1</sup>

### Formation of the POH and then the VOH

In response to the women's plight, the Polyclinic of Hope center was established in 1995 by Church World Service and Witness USA (CWS/USA), the parent organization of Rwanda Women Network, in the Nyarugenge District of Kigali. After the genocide, CWS-USA initiated a two year program (1994–1996) whose core objective was care of the large number of orphans left after the genocide.

"In order to do that strategically and sustainably [CWS] organized groups of widows and women's associations who are either related or not related to these children to equip them with capacity by becoming self-employed so that they could care for these children. The underlying objective was to strengthen them so they could foster so many orphans."

— Peter, VOH staff member<sup>2</sup>

CWS staff started out by encouraging individual women to tell their personal stories and to "go public" as a way of healing. At first, a few women came to the POH space which then was simply a rented room. Day by day, more women joined them and came out

of their isolation." ... The first group of 5 or 7 women came there to share their anguish, their challenges, their future. Initially, they would just come together and cry and go home. The next day, crying, talking, then they would go home. The third day, the situation would change. They would start talking, now breaking the silence amongst themselves to truly share their experiences. So the initiative began, and they started bringing in other women, neighbors and relatives until the figures grew to over 500 families just within the first two years."

After those two years, CWS completed their relief aid project and the Rwanda Women's Network, a newly formed local nongovernmental organization, took over the center to sustain the work the CSW had started. The focus remained women and their families. Although POH was primarily dealing with immediate medical needs, RWN realized this was not enough. The program grew with a more holistic view that included microfinance, skills training and development, education and awareness about reproductive health, HIV/AIDS, human and legal rights education; taking into account all the issues that could compromise the welfare of the women. The experience of these first years became recognized as a best practice in terms of rehabilitating a person, an individual as a whole. The first participants of the Polyclinic became important community organizers and agents of change.

From 1998 to 2000, RWN established the Village of Hope. Many of the women survivors had housing difficulties as a result of disputed inheritance, destruction, eviction, and discrimination. POH helped women repair houses and find accommodation. In 2000, RWN secured land and funding from various international aid agencies to build twenty houses with a center for community facilities in the middle. This provided a place for services for the residents of the village and the surrounding community and was modelled after the original POH in urban Kigali.

At that time over 500 women and children, every woman supporting a household of 10 to 15 family members, used the VOH. Today there are over 4500 women and children using the center, most infected with HIV/AIDS or living with relatives who are ill and infected.

### Activities at the Village of Hope

Everyday there is a different activity which helps give structure and regularity to the lives of people who suffered during the war.

**Caregivers** meet on Mondays to discuss the issues, visit patients, learn about patient needs and review inventory of medicine and food for the patients. RWN provides the caregivers with two month contracts which include money for care kits, medical supplies, food, and transportation. The contracts of caregivers are also reviewed on Mondays to ration out funds. In the afternoon, there are the cultural dance and drama and youth programs for children and orphans heading families. Sometimes these groups make money from performing at wedding ceremonies or meetings.

**The Cultivation and Agriculture Program**, which started in 2003, holds its meetings on Tuesdays, but the women work daily in the field cultivating the land adjacent to the VOH currently unused by the government. There are over 2,000 members who cultivate nutritional crops, such as green vegetables, carrots, cabbage, mango, passion fruits and much more. Land is divided into parts for the different crops that are all sold at the market. Revenue from the crops is managed by a committee of women who sell the fruits and vegetables.

**Beadwork Program**, which also started in 2003, works with two groups of women. One group comes on Tuesdays and another on Thursdays. Women and children learn to make handicrafts by coming together and teaching each other. RWN buys all the materials for these activities, and after selling the products, the money is reimbursed. With the money received from winning the UN-Habitat Best Practices Dubai Award, RWN could buy a place in town for women to sell their products. Finding the right market for the goods that are produced by the women is difficult. Visitors to the VOH and foreigners are the largest customers.

**Knitting Group** was started in 2006 and also holds its meetings on Thursdays, but everyday in the morning, the women members come to knit on the

40 machines at the center. RWN buys the materials and pays for the teachers. The group started with 100 women and now has 592 members. By the end of the first year of training, the group becomes quite skilled. Knitting of Bedcovers is a Thursday Activity, started in 2003 when women from Mathare Mothers Development Center in Kenya came to train the women in this activity. Now there is a trainer for women to use the machines. Sick people cannot go for gardening or farming but they can do the handicrafts. In the beginning, members contributed about 50 Francs to get the materials they needed, but since they now earn the money from their activities the group has stopped collecting money.

**Youth Groups Tailoring Program** meets from Monday to Friday. The trainer is one of the first orphans who learned the skill from the program. Now she is working at VOH as a staff member and teaching other orphans.

**World Food Program** started in 2003, and distributes food to members who are involved in the activities. To be a part of this program, RWN asks that members open a RWN savings account.

RWN also has a program for **Socio-Economic Empowerment** where women learn about community laws and citizenship. Some of this involves training. Additionally, RWN provides Counseling to about 10 people per day, and also provides School Support for vulnerable children and children living in child-headed households, by paying for their school fees and materials. There is no longer a Medical Clinic at the Village of Hope. Sick patients are taken by VOH vehicle to the Polyclinic or to the hospital.

### At the VOH there are seven activity groups:

1. Cultivating	2,018
2. Bead work	902
3. Bedcovers	502
4. Knitting sweaters	595
5. Cultural dance, games & drama club	99
6. Cards	124
7. Tailoring	284
<b>Total Members</b>	<b>4,524</b>

A group of thirty women involved in these activities are also in the **Home-Based Caregivers**. HBCG are organized groups of grassroots women who are creating a holistic, community-driven response to the HIV/AIDS pandemic by organizing themselves. Rather than tying women to traditional roles as caregivers, home based care groups come together to improve not just the quality of health care of infected people, but also the ability of infected and affected community members to secure access to basic services, livelihoods, and food security. Organizing around home-based care has proven to be a vital strategy for grassroots women to develop an advocacy platform for improved access to health care and to stand up against asset and property stripping that accompanies personal and social crisis. This group of thirty women also work as volunteer members of the Focal Points, an organization similar to Watchdog Groups of GROOTS Kenya.

*“So the time we started building the confidence of the patients they started to feel free to talk to us. Before I started the work of the caregiver my daughter was infected and I started to care for her. I saw the way that people treated her and talked to her and that affected me. We teach them [our patients] how to use the drugs. We also teach them how to dig [cultivate small crops of sustainable food], and small income generation like making bed covers and gardening.”*

—Mukabaziga Felcita, a resident of the VOH with her two children since 2004, and caregiver

*“We didn’t just start as caregivers, we started first learning our rights and the laws and then we began the work of the caregivers... [To] be a caregiver gave the women hope. It gave us a purpose. After putting us here at the Village of Hope, that is when we started learning that we were sick [HIV/AIDS positive]. That’s also when we started to see ourselves as a team that is fighting for women and for our children. We are trying to teach our children to be friends and to support each other. At that time when we started to go to the villages we started to find that patients*

*were being pushed away from their homes. That’s when we started to learn about the laws and RWN started to teach us the laws.”*

—Mukamura Gwa Laurance, resident of the VOH for the past three years and an active member of the Home-Based Care Alliance

*“It has now been two year since I am among the people infected... I hope the organization will continue to support the mothers and the widows to know their rights—women’s rights in Rwanda and their rights to property and inheritance. Now we help them [our patients] and support them to go to the courts and we inform them on the laws of the courts. I am a member of the Focal Points [like Watchdog Groups/Whistle Blowers in Kenya]. We work with the local authorities and those who are affected [infected patients], and we teach the women about will writing.”*

—Mukaminega Thoeophile, caregiver

RWN assists sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) survivors to become advocates of human rights of women, thereby moving as many as possible from the status of victim to advocate. This include integrated holistic training of core trainers of the SGBV service providers at central, regional district and commune levels, and production and dissemination of SGBV information and educational materials.

*“The initial issue is acceptance and the recognition. That is why that space is important to women. Mobilization, coordination and networking are needed to promote social economic empowerment of women. Nationally, regionally and internationally this approach of the Polyclinic of Hope has become recognized and there is need for us to answer this high demand call to reach out to more women and their families, by replicating the initiative in the country, by helping neighboring countries in the region with similar situations who can learn from the experience of the centers. The women who are a part of the POH and the VOH are able to spread the gospel [the POH/VOH experience] and mobilize other women by showing how these centers have changed their lives.”*

—Peter, VOH staff member

## Challenges & Plans for the Future



“The initial issue is acceptance and the recognition. That is why that space is important to women. Mobilization, coordination and networking are needed to promote social economic empowerment of women.”

The key factors for long-term sustainability of the centers are, first, owning the space, and second, good, participatory planning and management of the existing facilities. **RWN** plans to acquire its own permanent space in to house the Polyclinic of Hope and RWN offices with a medical wing. But land prices are very high in central Kigali; the estimated cost is close to \$500,000.

RWN also plans to replicate these centers and its best practices in other parts of Kigali and Rwanda to reach out to more women survivors of sexual and gender-based

violence. Two new Polyclinics of Hope have already been established in the Bugeseva and Buture districts. New initiatives in rural areas would require \$150,000–200,000. This continued expansion requires supporting multiple spaces and is a major challenge. Therefore, RWN plans to make the centers become more self-supporting and autonomous. This would require developing activities that are self-sustaining to ensure financing of the centers, as well as creating a steady source of long term funding, such as an endowment or foundation. ■

### REFERENCES

<sup>1</sup> [www.rwandawomennetwork.org](http://www.rwandawomennetwork.org).

<sup>2</sup> All interviews were conducted on site by Nicole Ganzekaufer in 2008.

## Turkey

# Women and Children Centers: Kadin Emegini Degerlendirme Vakfi (KEDV)

**WOMEN AND CHILDREN CENTERS (WCC)** are community centers that are “owned” and run by grassroots women. The centers offer affordable childcare and education for young children on flexible schedule, a much needed service for working mothers in poor neighborhoods. Childcare services also provide a socially legitimate reason for women to come out of the isolation of their homes, meet other women, and participate in a range of capacity building programs offered through the center. The WCC concept was developed by Kadin Emegini Degerlendirme Vakfi (KEDV) to support grassroots women develop their leadership, and to create opportunities for them take on public roles in improving their communities.<sup>1</sup> The first WCC was opened in 1987 in Gungoren, a working class neighborhood in Istanbul. Since then, KEDV has facilitated the development of 23 Women & Children Centers in 12 provinces, easily adopting this concept to other low-income neighborhoods in Istanbul, to post-disaster conditions after the 1999 Marmara earthquake, and to the post-conflict south-eastern region of Turkey. Since 2002, grassroots women organized as autonomous enterprise cooperatives have been operating the WCCs.

## BACKGROUND

Since the 1980s, structural adjustment policies have led to increasing overall wealth but also new forms of poverty and exclusion, and increased social, cultural, and economic polarization in Turkey. Accelerated rates of urbanization in the late 1980s, brought new migrants to large cities especially from the conflict ridden areas in the southeast. Women in low income neighborhoods have disproportionately felt the burden of these developments. Migration to the cities often meant new conditions of isolation and poverty for women as they were cut off from their support systems. It was hard for women to find work in cities, and when they did, it was under increasingly insecure and marginal conditions—with minimal wages and often no benefits or support services such as child care. In general, around 11 percent of young children have access to childcare and education in Turkey.

The KEDV was established within this context in 1986 by a small group of professional women with grassroots backgrounds. Their mission was to support poor women’s leadership in improving their own lives and communities. The group started home-based meetings with women in low income neighborhoods and visited workplaces to find out women’s priorities and concerns. Quality childcare turned out to be a major concern for women. Organizing around childcare services was also a socially acceptable way, in a conservative society like Turkey, to



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reach out to grassroots women in poor communities.<sup>2</sup> KEDV started helping women from these communities to organize and negotiate with local municipalities for public space and utilities so that they could start their childcare centers with an adjacent women's room where capacity and leadership building programs would be offered. The women would sustain their centers through the income raised from childcare services and women's economic activities.

KEDV works as a facilitator and resource partner with grassroots women's groups on their immediate practical needs and links this to issues of power, equality & control. Its participatory approach, reliance on local resources, and success in establishing private and public sector partnerships has been unique among NGOs in Turkey. KEDV focuses on four interrelated program areas: 1) early childcare and education, 2) individual and collective capacity building, 3) income generation and economic empowerment, and since the 1999 Marmara earthquake disaster, 4) pre- and post-disaster community development initiatives.

In addition to its advocacy efforts for dissemination of affordable, community-based child care services, KEDV has been developing materials and tools, and offering trainings to local groups interested in developing their own initiatives since 1998. KEDV has also produced handbooks and provided trainings to teachers and educators on child-centered, democratic, and inclusive approaches to early childhood education. It organizes peer learning exchanges among women's groups in Turkey, and through its membership with GROOTS International and the Huairou Commission, local women leaders have participated in peer exchanges in India and Iran and Bulgaria.

KEDV has established three social enterprises to support and increase the visibility of local women's groups' initiatives. Maya, the first microcredit organization in Turkey established in 2002, provides small loans to women entrepreneurs to start up or sustain their businesses. It is separate from the local savings groups that women organize around in WCCs. The second, Nahil, was established in 2003 to provide opportunities for women to market their products. Income generated through its stores and the second

hand sales events it organizes, supports the formation of new WCCs and early childhood education activities. The national Women's Cooperatives Network started its activities in 2001 as women's groups in WCCs organized around cooperatives, and now has nearly 60 members around the country. It provides its members a platform to share information, build capacity and have a stronger public presence.

KEDV has received national and international recognition and awards for its work on early childhood education and in supporting women's economic independence and leadership.

## WOMEN AND CHILDREN CENTERS

The first WCC was opened in 1987 in Gungoren, a working class neighborhood in Istanbul. KEDV, together with the local women, negotiated for space with the local municipality. The place was furnished with donations from the private sector. KEDV organized training and capacity building programs at the center that were open to the whole community. Women also started small individual or collective businesses or participated in KEDV's toy-making enterprise, selling their products at the local market to generate income for themselves and the WCC. Even though there were licensed teachers and an administrator, as required by the government, the mothers were in charge of making key decisions about the childcare program. They would decide on how much each family would pay for the sliding scale fees, provide input to educational programs, and even participate in some. For instance, mothers from different regions would be asked to teach the children songs that they knew and cook their local food. Participation in these activities was important for women to build up their confidence, and for children to see their mothers in a public authority role. In a couple of years, other centers were established in Istanbul the same way.

In 1999, two major earthquakes devastated the Marmara region, killing 18,000 people and leaving over 250,000 families homeless. As KEDV staff reached out to the affected communities in response to their acute needs, they realized that the disaster could be turned into an opportunity for development and social change by involving women in the re-



construction and development process. Rather than distributing aid, KEDV started setting up Women and Children Centers for women to get together to support each other, overcome their trauma, and plan to rebuild their lives.<sup>3</sup>

The first Women and Children Centers were set up in tents and containers in tent cities. After a couple of months, as people were moved to temporary settlements, KEDV set up eight prefabricated centers in three provinces with funding from Netherlands (NOVIB) and the US (AJWS) and working in partnership with the Social Services Administration. The WCCs became a well-respected presence in the settlements and among government officials, and met key needs under crisis conditions. First they provided safe and secure spaces, as communal living rooms for women and childcare services for their children. They served as a central place to gather and disseminate information on post-disaster programs, and meet with the media, experts, and local officials. They also provided a base where women could receive skills training, start new livelihoods to rebuild their lives, and to host local and international exchanges.

Within two years, WCCs became independent grassroots women's organizations and secured public resource allocation for centers. Tenants formed housing cooperatives to solve their housing problem. Some of the leaders participated in peer exchanges (in India, southeast Turkey, Bulgaria, and Iran) to provide support and guidance to women in new disaster areas. Four of these WCCs, located in

the new housing settlements in the region, continue their activities.

In 2002, KEDV set up three Women and Children Centers in collaboration with women from Diyarbakir and Mardin, the post-conflict region in southeast Turkey. The centers were located in the low-income neighbourhoods of Diyarbakir and Mardin, where majority of the families were relocated from their villages by the government during the conflict. The WCCs are run by women's groups organized around independent women's cooperatives, who mobilize local resources (sliding scale fees for childcare, partnerships with the private sector, and negotiations with local government officials) to offer parent-run childcare services, capacity-building programs on demand, health screenings, and livelihood support and income generation activities. The WCC serves an important function in this context by bringing women and families in direct contact with government officials around community concerns.

In Mardin, the WCC started its activities in a small building with the participation of 60 children and their mothers. The women, some of whom had never left the neighborhood before, went in groups to local government offices and businesses to raise resources for their center. They convinced the chief of police to pay their rent for the first year (extended to 3 years) by arguing early childcare/education would promote social cohesion and create a peaceful, crime-free environment. They negotiated with the governor for space in the old city for a handicrafts and soap-making workshop, from where they now market their



products. Recently, the group got a large contract to export its soaps to Sweden. During the local elections, as the candidates visited the WCC, the women voiced their demands, and could get running water to their community. The new bright murals on the WCC's walls at the main square of the neighborhood reflect the women's hope and confidence in improving their lives and communities.

The Women and Children Center concept transforms and values the traditional roles of women at home as care givers and educators into public roles as service providers. Unlike the conventional social work approach where the poor are passive recipients of pre-programmed services, it is the grassroots women and their families who manage and collectively decide about the programs at WCCs. Bringing together women and families from different social and ethnic backgrounds, and emphasizing respect for differences (whether social, political, cultural, religious, or related to physical disabilities), WCCs become sites of local democracy and social inclusion. It is from this base that the grassroots women's groups negotiate with local authorities for resources and greater participation in decisions that affect their lives and communities. ■



## Turkey

# İlk Adım Women and Children Center İlk Adım Women's Environment, Culture, and Enterprise Cooperative

## İLK ADIM KADIN ÇEVRE KÜLTÜR VE İŞLETME KOOPERATİFİ (WOMEN'S ENVIRONMENT, CULTURE, AND ENTERPRISE COOPERATIVE)

was formally established in 2004 by a small group of grassroots women in Nurtepe, Kagithane, one of the lowest income subdistricts of Istanbul. It took two years for the group and the KEDV to secure space and establish their Women and Children Center (WCC). Run by the women themselves, the WCC now provides a home base for grassroots women from different backgrounds to come together. The cooperative's Women and Children Center (WCC) is a site of cultural democracy in this diverse but fragmented neighborhood. İlk Adım (meaning "the first step" in Turkish) offers capacity building, leadership development and income generation programs, as well as parent-run early childcare and education services. One of İlkadım's leaders received an Ashoka Fellowship in 2007 for her "social entrepreneurship," and in 2009, KEDV and İlk Adım were recognized by Urban Age Award for their role in improving the urban environment for women and communities.<sup>4</sup>

### MISSION

The mission of İlk Adım is to empower women, to enable them to stand on their own feet, and to feel strong in life. Its principles are to prevent discrimination, not to adhere to a particular political view, to prioritize women's conditions and needs in planning their activities, and to be open to the participation of all women in the neighborhood."

### PRIMARY ACTIVITIES AND USERS

The group's primary activities are:

- Early childcare and education for children ages 3–6
- Leadership support
- Capacity-building activities (financial literacy and computer training, programs on citizenship, women's rights, and domestic violence, and training of Neighborhood Mothers)
- Community building and local governance
- Livelihood support and income generation (savings groups, second hand store, recycling program)

On average, 150 women use the center annually. Recently 800 people (including spouses) received training on violence against women. The childcare program has 30–40 students. The cooperative meetings and trainings are open to all women in the community.

Improving our community,  
formalizing our leadership



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## NETWORKS

İlk Adım Cooperative is a member and sits on the executive council of the national Women's Cooperatives Network (Kadin Kooperatifleri İletişim Ağı) facilitated by the KEDV. It is linked to the Huairou Commission and GROOTS International through its partnership with the KEDV.

## FUNDING

Since the local municipality provided the building, the cooperative does not have to pay for rent or utilities (water, electricity) or for the physical maintenance of the building, such as painting or small repairs. KEDV provided the furnishings and appliances through its second hand store.

The cooperative covers its own programmatic expenses. The wages of the licensed teacher and two cooperative members who work as teacher's aides (150 TL and 400 TL, or US \$98 and US \$260) as well as the kitchen expenses of the childcare center are covered by payments made by parents along a sliding scale. These fees are supplemented by income from the group's second hand store. The rest of the activities are conducted on a volunteer basis by cooperative members. For projects supported by external funding, the members in charge of the project receive minor compensation.

## TENURE, OWNERSHIP, AND MANAGEMENT

The building belongs to the local municipality. During the first year, there was a written protocol for the allocation of space to the cooperative. The municipality has not updated the document for the past few years.

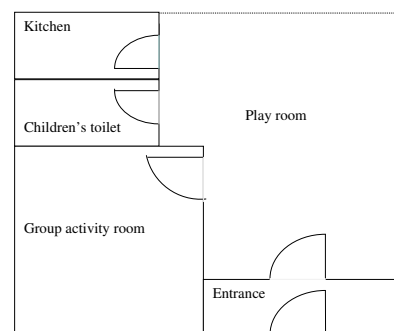
Nine women share the responsibility of running the activities at the center. All are grassroots women, between the ages 25–50, who live in the neighborhood. The cooperative holds monthly executive board meetings. Members of the cooperative meet every two weeks. Both of these meetings are open to everyone in the community.

## DESCRIPTION OF SPACE

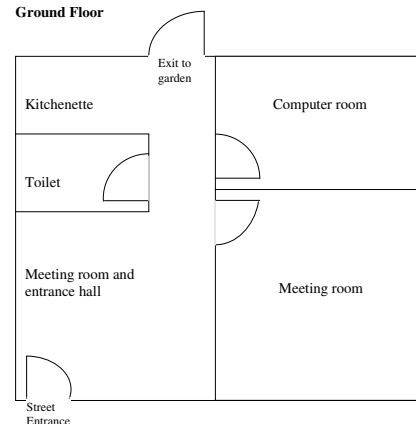
This is a two story, reinforced concrete building constructed right after the 1999 earthquake, on a 150 square meter lot. Each floor is about 100–120 square meters and the building has a small garden. Part of the building is still used as the local headman's office. The ground floor houses the women's center which has a small office that serves as a library/resource center and computer room, a training/meeting room, an entrance hall/living room, and a toilet and kitchenette. The children's center on the second floor is larger with a group activities room, a play room, its own kitchen and the children's toilets. The cooperative members and children use the backyard for their activities in the summer. The building itself is very modest, but its well-kept garden stands out in an area with little greenery.



Second floor – Child care center



Ground Floor



### Background

Poor neighborhoods in Turkish cities are no longer safe places for women and children as the traditional mahalle (neighborhood) spirit has started disappearing. Nurtepe is a neighborhood of poor recent migrants who have come to Istanbul from the eastern and southeastern regions of Turkey. In addition to poverty, unemployment, crime and basic infrastructure problems, the area suffers from social and political polarization due to the different ethnic and cultural backgrounds of its residents.

In this context, the physical presence of the Women and Children Center represents the activism and solidarity among women, subtly challenging the norms that marginalize grassroots women and perpetuate the dominant patriarchal culture. The flurry of women and children going in and out of the building, its well kept garden, the mural and billboard at the entrance of the childcare and playroom (named after Cansu, a member's daughter, who was killed in a traffic accident) imply not only a safe place for women and children, but also a new vision for a peaceful community.

"What led us to create the center were the realities of the neighborhood—lack of childcare services, language or illiteracy problem of women who are new to the city, and of course, their lack of confidence in themselves... We organize the place based on our own needs and needs of other women who live in the neighborhood. We wanted to make women's lives a little easier. We wanted to have a place where women could leave their kids at childcare, and come to seek answers to their questions, and get training. This place does not belong to an agency, but rather to women from the neighborhood, so that makes it easy to establish relations."<sup>5</sup>

### The formation of İlk Adim Cooperative

In 2002, a small group of women from Nurtepe, who "wanted to do something about their community" approached KEDV for support. They had already

contacted other NGOs but found KEDV's principles similar to theirs. The leadership training and organizing support KEDV offered to the women enabled them to prepare and follow an action plan for creating their Women and Children Center.

The group started out by conducting individual and group meetings in order to listen to and document the needs and priorities of women in the community. The trainings conducted in the neighborhood by KEDV staff during this period helped the group reach out to more women in the community, and to find out about new issues, such as the large number of persons with disabilities in the neighborhood. The information gathered during these meetings was important not only for program development, but also for negotiations with potential partners. Next, the women started identifying and contacting potential partners from the public, private and not-for-profit sectors. Forming partnerships was important not only for raising these initial resources, but also for sustaining and expanding the activities of the center.

The women shared the information they had gathered with the local headman, who was supportive, and with the municipality and governorship, as well as with local businesses and residents at neighborhood meetings, seeking their involvement and contributions. Their transparency in sharing information proved effective.

*"We partnered with the Municipality in getting the space. The Sub-Province Administration gave us support in obtaining the required infrastructure for the play room. We linked community members to the literacy programs, trainings and other services available from the Municipality and the Sub-Province administration and collaborated with them. We partnered with the KEDV in furnishing the center, and in training of trainers, program development, and linking to partners. Families and shop owners in the community also made in kind donations. These are all ongoing partnerships."*

—Senem Gul, co-founder of İlk Adim

Initial alliances and partnerships were enriched over time, as KEDV connected İlk Adim to national NGOs working on issues relevant for the community, such as services for disabled children, conflict resolution, and training for youth. This enabled the group to start referring people from Nurtepe to specific programs and services. Furthermore, the alliance with KEDV connected İlk Adim with academics to document its programs, and to corporate volunteers, such as those from the Sabancı Holding.

After two years of preparation and work to eventually secure the space, İlk Adim Cooperative was formally registered in 2004 as an independent organization, and the Women and Children Center started its operations. First the childcare and playroom were set up, offering flexible early childcare and education (morning, afternoon, or full day) services for 3 to 6 year-old children. This program provided a socially legitimate, as well as practical, reason for women to come out of their isolation at home. Participating in the trainings and working with others on different projects and activities built up their confidence and ability to express themselves in public. They started to develop a public group identity,

*"The fact that the play room is in the same building nearby is a comfort. If it weren't for this space, the children would not be able to get such high quality education. And I would not be able to come here."*

"What we like most about this space is that it enables us to come together. We cherish our dialogues, friendships, the results of our common efforts, feeling that we are supporting others..."

*"[Here] we learn how to communicate with people. We know that we have friends, we have a place to go when we are in trouble. It is a place like our home. It is the second address that we feel close to. It is important that it fully belongs to us. It provides a place*

*for us to use for all our activities. If we did not have this space, perhaps we could get involved in things individually, but this place enables us to conduct collective activities."*

*"We learned to implement projects, we learned to write reports, organize paperwork, etc. We have formed a group of trainers among ourselves so that we can conduct some of the training sessions by ourselves."*

The women's relations at home and with each other also changed.

*"I am responsible for the play room at the cooperative. At first my husband did not want me to come here; he thought I'd neglect my housework and the children. But he was secretly afraid that I'd become a feminist... Through the trainings here, I realized I wasn't being fair to him either. I always expected understanding from him. He is nervous when he is unemployed. Now I try to be understanding, too. He notices how I have changed."*

*"I participate in the workshop activities... No one says anything about another's religion (sect) or political party. It is pleasant to be with my friends here... I don't earn money here but I know I am doing something meaningful."<sup>6</sup>*

İlk Adim has been offering trainings in leadership development, financial literacy, entrepreneurship, computers, and the Neighborhood Mothers Program (home-based childcare system developed by KEDV). Most recently, in 2009, İlk Adim offered a program on domestic violence. This program held separate training sessions for women, mothers-in-law, and men. Women learned to both protect themselves against violence and to mitigate the conditions that lead to it. Initially KEDV organized all the trainings but later, through a "training of trainers" program, KEDV trained some of the cooperative members to be the trainers. Now İlk Adim can organize its own training sessions in some of these areas, such as domestic violence, without relying on KEDV. The trainers receive a small allowance for their work.



The sliding scale fees paid by parents for early childcare services still make up most of the revenues to run the WCC. In addition, the group has initiated a range of activities for income generation, ranging from sewing and repair services, selling homemade jams or dried fruits and vegetables people bring from their villages, organizing community picnics to national parks, to producing gift boxes. The municipality had helped with the training in gift box production, but unable to afford the rent for a workshop this activity is now on hold. The second-hand business is another main source of income for the group and operate out of a store in a neighboring area. Cooperative members also have formed three

savings groups, and created an emergency fund to borrow from according to their share to meet health, education, or home expenses.

Even though the sub-province administration and government agencies kept their distance from the cooperative, at the beginning partly for political reasons. Over time, as they got to know the group and saw their media coverage over time, they started to provide more support. The district administrator declared that he will support İlk Adım in other neighborhoods within his district. The cooperative is now invited to all the local government meetings with civil society organizations, and can voice the concerns of women in the community.

"I used to be a mother who always said 'no'. This led to arguments with my son... I have changed through my friends and the trainings at the center. I now read the paper every day and express my own views about political issues and developments."

## Challenges & Plans for the Future



**İLK ADIM COOPERATIVE** hopes to create income generation and employment opportunities for women, and to help replicate similar WWCs in other neighborhoods. Members have indicated, “women’s groups from nearby neighborhoods come to us for advice.” And the community resource teams trained at the center, together with the KEDV staff, supported mothers of disabled children from their center establish their own WCC and cooperative in Gültepe. “We want to support other groups and to disseminate these kinds of initiatives but economic support is necessary to be able to do this. We would like municipalities in other places to encourage such initiatives.”

Even though the WCC was set up to be sustainable over the long term, lack of sufficient funding continues to be a problem. One reason is that not all members can afford to work on projects on a volunteer basis. As the women are well aware, they cannot rely exclusively on outside support; such support is precarious, especially at times of economic crisis, and can be influenced by party politics. The sustainability of the center depends on the de-

termination and creativity of the women to find new revenue sources, to become more self-sufficient and to negotiate with the local government to maintain their space.

In order to reach their goal of long-term sustainability, the women have been exploring different options to develop other sources of revenue to maintain their activities. For instance, they would like to expand their childcare program so that more children can benefit from the services. However, this requires more space. They also need a workshop space for their other income generation activities, like box making. At the same time, they are trying to strengthen their partnership with the local authorities by starting new initiatives on issues that are of concern to them. For instance, the women started a recycling initiative by convincing the municipality and residents to separate the garbage. Another initiative they have considered, with support from KEDV, is to engage the City’s Disaster Coordination Center, along with the municipality and academics, to start a community disaster preparedness program in the neighborhood. ■

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## India

# Mahila Mahiti Kendras: Grassroots Women's Knowledge and Training Centers and Swayam Shikshan Prayog (SSP)

**MAHILA MAHITI KENDRAS** are community information centers owned and run by rural women's self-help groups, serving clusters of 10–15 villages. These public meeting spaces, exclusively for women, provide a nurturing environment for development of grassroots women's leadership and skills, and create public recognition of their work.<sup>1</sup> The first center was built in Latur by the women's group Mahila Milan who were mobilized by Swayam Shikshan Prayog (SSP) after the 1994 earthquake disaster. As the coordinator of the post-disaster program initiated by the Maharashtra State and the World Bank, SSP had center-staged women's groups to play key roles in the recovery process. In 1997, as the program was coming to a close, the women's groups created these centers to consolidate and continue their public roles. Through a process of peer exchange and adaptation, Mahiti Kendras spread first in Maharashtra, and later in Gujarat, as SSP and the Maharashi women reached out to support women affected by the Bhuj earthquake. Similarly, after the tsunami, as SSP started supporting disaster affected women to organize, peer exchange visits with women's groups from Maharashtra and Gujarat led to the formation of Women's Knowledge and Information Centers in Tamil Nadu. In 2009, the number of grassroots women's information centers had climbed to over 60 in the three states.

## BACKGROUND

India is located in one of the most disaster prone regions in the world. Over the past two decades, two major earthquakes in 1994 and 2001, the tsunami disaster in 2004, as well as several floods and hurricanes hit different parts of the country, causing substantial destruction and human and material losses. At the same time, India has been going through a series of economic transformations and adopting structural adjustment policies. The increased privatization and cuts in public subsidies and social programs led to substantial price increases for basic services, such as water, electricity, and transportation, and reductions in food security, credit and livelihood programs. These developments further marginalized the poor, especially women, worsening their already difficult living conditions.

Within this context, Swayam Shikshan Prayog (SSP), meaning "self education for empowerment," started working in rural Maharashtra in 1989 to support women and the poor to organize and actively participate in decisions that affect their lives. Formally registered as an NGO in 1998, SSP's mission is "to build and enhance core social, economic and political competencies of grassroots women's collectives and communities with the aim of bringing rural poor women and communities from margin to mainstream of development processes."<sup>2</sup>

SSP's mission is "to build and enhance core social, economic and political competencies of grassroots women's collectives and communities with the aim of bringing rural poor women and communities from margin to mainstream of development processes."



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To achieve this mission, SSP emphasizes: “practical learning, rather than programs and services, to allow women in poor communities to reflect on their everyday experiences, articulate their needs and priorities, experience women-led solutions to daily problems, and move from being mere participants to resource persons and experts. As self-learning within women’s groups grows, SSP facilitates the transfer of innovations/best practices across women’s groups. Later as women’s knowledge, people-base, and resources expand, SSP facilitates information transfers and capacity building so women elected members of Panchayati Raj (local councils) can emerge that will represent this movement.”<sup>3</sup>

SSP works with local women’s groups, organized around savings and credit groups and federations, mainly as a facilitator and technical resource partner.<sup>4</sup> It facilitates their access to information, training, microfinance, sustainable livelihoods and basic services (health, education, water) by forming linkages and partnerships with public, private and nonprofit institutions, and supports their active participation in local planning and government decisions. Peer learning exchanges are a key tool that SSP uses to share and adapt grassroots’ women’s successful development practices both within India and internationally, such as the post-disaster peer exchanges in Gujarat, Tamilnadu, Bihar and Orissa, and internationally, in Turkey and Sri Lanka.

At present SSP works in ten of the most disaster prone districts in Maharashtra, Gujarat (2001) and Tamil Nadu (2004) reaching out to over 300,000 families.<sup>5</sup> It also coordinates the Community Disaster Resilience Fund Global Pilot Project started in India in October 2008, and facilitates the Disaster Watch, a Global Working Group of the Huairou Commission and [www.disasterwatch.net](http://www.disasterwatch.net).

### MAHILA MAHITI KENDRAS

The Maharashtra earthquake of 1993 created massive damage in Latur and other parts of rural Maharashtra, leaving over 11,000 people dead and 200,000 homeless. SSP, as the coordinator of the State’s participatory repair and strengthening program, created leadership roles for women to transform this mass-scale disaster recovery into a development op-

portunity. In each village, existing women’s self-help groups, or mahila milans, organized around savings and credit groups, and assigned and supported two of their members to be hired by the state government as samwad sahayaks (communication assistants) in the recovery program. Samwad Sahayaks were trained in construction techniques, and together with the mahila milan, they disseminated information on safe construction techniques, monitored and resolved conflicts in the reconstruction process, and increased women’s participation in local panchayat (village assembly) meetings. They also periodically met with district officials to report progress and get resources to their community.

As the recovery program was coming to a close, the women realized that they had to develop a practical solution to stay active in public life. They envisioned “public homes” where they could meet without having to negotiate with men for space in order to expand their community development activities. These would be information, training and resource centers serving a cluster of 10–15 villages.

The first Mahiti Kendra was created in 1997 in Usturi Village in Latur, Maharashtra. The building of the center was a learning and capacity-building process itself. It required developing a number of new skills, i.e., negotiating with the local administrators for land allocation, identifying and raising the resources, managing and monitoring the budget and planning, often directly participating in the construction process, and communicating the experience to women’s groups from other villages as they came to learn about the process.<sup>6</sup> In Usturi, the women started out by surveying all the vacant lots in the village and explored what their village assembly could contribute. The lots offered to them by the gram panchayat were not suitable. So they decided to talk to the owner of a larger lot they had identified adjacent to the temple. The owner, a religious figure who no longer lived in the village, readily agreed to donate the land to the women’s group, provided he would be allowed some space to perform his religious activities when he visited. The legal papers were signed, and the women strategically invited the village administrator to the inauguration ceremony so that he would feel part of the process. In order to keep the construction costs

down, they decided to construct the building themselves, and asked SSP to help organize an on-site masonry training. Eighty women from the nine neighboring villages participated in the training, and everyone from the village was asked to contribute to the construction according to their interests and skills, which helped save a lot of money. Four

women supervised the site in daily shifts and developed a system of keeping records that enabled the number of hours contributed by each member. The building process strengthened the women's confidence and recognition of their capacity and leadership in the community.

Women from other villages started visiting the mahiti kendra as it was being constructed to learn about the process from their peers, and then mobilized their local resources to build their own centers. By 2004, there were fifteen mahiti kendras, owned and constructed by women in Maharashtra and Gujarat. But this was not as easy task. Women's groups often faced opposition and had to struggle with the Gram Panchayat (village administration) for access to land. For instance, Mangal Raosaheb Patil from Katejawalga Tal in Latur explains the struggles and accomplishments of her group as follows:<sup>7</sup>

"Our group meeting used to be held in different places. We women felt that we should have our own place as a 'women's office.' We got information on Mahila Mahiti Kendra in Melava. As per that we applied to the Gram Panchayat. On 15th August 1998 the sarpanch sanctioned a place near the temple for MMK. Elections were held and new sarpanch got elected. He stopped our work. We called a meeting of mahila mandal to decide the strategy to deal with this problem. Another meeting was organized in which respective personalities, and gram panchayat members were invited. Before that 100–150 people were ready with sticks and stones to protest our meeting. We told them that this is MMK; we are not constructing to run our houses. This MMK will benefit not only our village but surrounding 10 more villages... [and to the Sarpanch, we] said decision cannot



change for every new person. If you do not want to establish friendly relations with us or do not want to deal with us as per the rules, then we are also ready to face you. Then the respected teacher of the village intervened into the matter and told the opposite members that if you do not allow these women to construct the MMK, they will not

allow you to be on this seat or run GP for five years. Everybody then realized the power of our unity. Then one person of opposite came forward with the coconut and did the inauguration of the foundation work.

... At present, we use our MMK for savings and credit groups meetings, cluster committee meeting, camps for adolescents, trainings for livelihood activities, and the newly elected women's gram panchayat. We even call doctors, lawyers, and police to give us guidance. We have conducted medical camps with the local public health clinics. We also conduct second week Monday as a information day, on which different government officials come and give us information on various government schemes. We have a committee of people consisting of 10 village women for our Mahila Maiti Kendra (MMK). We try to keep our MMK live and accessible to everyone throughout 365 days. The literate women members give their volunteer time to help widows, divorcees and the elderly to apply for various government schemes, forms, etc. With the help of adolescent girls, we have drawn and collected information on our Taluka and display it in Mahila Mahiti Kendra. During the holidays of school, we conduct summer camps to the children. We ask them to write poems, stories, and drawings on social and environmental issues, which help to update their knowledge about their region."

As in these two villages in Latur, through their community centers, women's groups are increasingly involved in strengthening their village assemblies and monitoring and making local governments more accountable to their concerns around livelihoods, education, health, sanitation and water issues, and disaster risk reduction.<sup>8</sup> ■

# Samiyarpettai Village Community Center and ASHAA Self-Help Group

## AROGYA SAKHIS FOR HEALTH AWARENESS AND ACTION

**(ASHAA)** is a self-help membership organization established in May 2006 in Samiyarpettai Village in Cuddalore, Tamil Nadu. Aasha, meaning “hope” in several Indian languages, is one of the women’s groups that Swayam Shikshan Prayog (SSP) helped organize after the Indian Ocean tsunami devastated the communities in the region.<sup>9</sup> The self help group members, trained by SSP, mobilize around community health and address sanitation and hygiene issues and lobby on behalf of the community to improve access to, as well as the quality of, government services.<sup>10</sup> The group created its community center two years later, in May 2008. The center is used by 8–10 villages in the area.

## MISSION

ASHAA’s mission is to work in areas of health and environment, to create a disease-free village, improve sanitation, and create a better environment.

## PRIMARY ACTIVITIES AND USERS

The ASHAA group works on public health and hygiene issues and organizes to deal with the endemic problem of open defecation through building community toilets and small loans to poor women affected by illness. The group also lobbies to improve the community’s access to improved government services.

The center is used by the 13 ASHAA members and approximately 450 women in the village and in the surroundings areas.

## NETWORKS

ASHAA is part of the Swayam Shikshan Prayog’s network of community self-help groups. The Women’s Federation for Disaster Management and Community Development coordinates and strengthens ASHAA groups and helps reduce their SSP and external funding by charging membership fees to members to cover administrative costs and some costs of grassroots initiatives.

## FUNDING

The Tamil Nadu government contributed land for the construction of the center. Construction was funded and overseen by Swayam Shikshan Prayog. The women use the rent (250 India rupees per month) from a rice shop on the premises of the center to maintain the center.

Institutionalizing  
women’s leadership  
in local development...

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## TENURE, OWNERSHIP, AND MANAGEMENT

The land and property was given to the group by the government that holds its ownership. The center is managed and run by the ASHAA self help group members of Samiyarpettai village.

## DESCRIPTION OF SPACE

The ASHAA women were actively involved in the planning of the center. They were the ones who requested that separate rooms be constructed in the building to rent out to businesses so that the center could generate income to sustain itself.

The center is a one-story concrete block structure with a flat concrete roof. It has a large hall to hold various meetings and trainings of the ASHAA and the village local government, and to share with the community for various ceremonies and private events, a bathroom and two small rooms to rent out to businesses.



## The Process, Partnerships & Accomplishments

### Background

Samiyarpettai village is a fishing community by the Indian Ocean, prone to all kinds of natural hazards, from flooding and drought to earthquake. A couple of months before the tsunami struck southern India in December 2004, UNDP-GOI Disaster Risk Management (DRM) Program, in collaboration with the District Collector's office, selected Samiyarpettai to start a community-based disaster survival and management pilot program.<sup>11</sup> As a result of the community-based training, when the disaster struck, the village reported fewer deaths compared to neighboring areas. Still, the damage in the region was substantial, especially in poor rural communities. The tidal waves had penetrated inland up to 3 km, causing extensive damage and claiming 7,983 lives in Tamil Nadu alone. People lost their homes and livelihoods as the salination destroyed agricultural land, as well as the already limited infrastructure facilities.<sup>12</sup>

Swayam Shikshan Prayog (SSP) was invited to be part of the long-term recovery program in the tsunami affected region because of its success in facilitating women's groups during the post-disaster recovery and development in Maharashtra and Gujarat. Within a few weeks after the disaster, SSP started facilitating the organization of local women leaders as local health volunteers and trainers to mobilize women's self-help groups. The women's groups first mapped and surveyed the families in their villages to identify vulnerable persons, such as the widows and the elderly, and helped them access relief aid. SSP also organized a small team of grassroots women leaders from Maharashtra and Gujarat to visit the area and share their experiences with the women's groups. These groups now address community health, water and sanitation, government relations and alternative livelihood issues in the Cuddalore and Nagapattinam districts of Tamil Nadu.

The AASHA self-help group in Samiyarpettai The Arogya Sakhis for Health Awareness and Action (ASHAA) self-help group in Samiyarpettai was established in 2006. AASHA members work to improve the community's access to health care by building relationships with primary healthcare providers. They raise health awareness among women, encourage the use of herbal and home remedies, and start initiatives to improve sanitation and clean drinking water in their village. In addition, AASHA members tutor school children, conduct basic computer training for girls and boys, organize trainings on tailoring, incense making, detergent making, etc.

"When we started with our self help groups, most of the male members in the community were not happy with our initiatives, but now seeing that they are self-sustainable and result in advancements in the community, they are more open minded towards our work."

Before the center was built, the women would meet in open public spaces in the village, underneath a tree or at one of the women's homes to organize their activities and discuss community health issues. The idea of creating their own space occurred after the women's groups visited Maharashtra and saw the Mahila Mahiti Kendras. The women realized that as the group was growing, they needed a space to conduct regular meetings and through which to generate income for their activities. The community, too, needed a space where village events and functions could be held.

The AASHA group partnered with SSP and the Tamil Nadu government to get the land. The women identified the site by working with elders in the village and discussing with the local panchayat, who agreed that the village needed such a center. The group was actively involved in the planning and design of the building, demanding the construction of two extra rooms for renting out to businesses. For Kumutha, a woman from Samiyarpettai Village, the

most important feature of the building is, "The division of space: there is one big room in which to hold events and functions, and two smaller spaces that can be rented out for businesses and used to generate income."<sup>13</sup>

However, after completion of the building in 2008, the panchayat, the traditionally male-dominated local government, wanted to take over the building for government purposes. The women argued that they would allow the panchayat to hold its meetings there but they needed the space to run their operations on a daily basis. SSP supported the women leaders in their negotiations with the panchayat and the district administration to get permission and necessary documents to use the space.

The women now have a place to meet regularly and to organize events, trainings and other programs. The ASHAA group members run and manage the center. They learn business and accounting skills while overseeing the business and the maintenance of the center. One of the rooms is rented out to entrepreneurs who purchase rice in bulk and then deliver it to villagers at small profit. The rent covers the building's maintenance costs. The AASHA group offers summer camps for school children at the center. They also allow people in the village to organize functions, ceremonies and religious rituals in the building, provided that they first get permission from the ASHAA group and submit an appropriate payment. It is also used by the panchayat to hold its village government meetings. The state government organizes health camps and other awareness training at the center in collaboration with the AASHA group.

As Chitra, a resident of the Samiyarpettai Village indicated this space has also increased the visibility and respect for the women's activities in the community: "The community center is a nice place in which to organize events and meetings. When we started with our self help groups, most of the male members in the community were not happy with our initiatives, but now seeing that they are self-sustainable and result in advancements in the community, they are more open minded towards our work."<sup>14</sup>

Having a physical space in the village gives women power to address basic issues in the village, intervene in day-to-day affairs, and participate in local governance.

## Challenges & Plans for the Future



The cooperation of the village Panchayat and the unity of the women's group are key factors for the long-term sustainability of the center. **ASHAA** members were able to convince the community and the village panchayat has already once tried to take over the community center, but after negotiations the women's group was able to keep the center for another year. With a new administration, ASHAA members may have to renegotiate the terms of tenure to sustain their ownership. Therefore, the group has nurtured a close relationship with local elected

leaders and the government system. How the center will fare will also depend on how much income is generated from the associated businesses.

The group is now planning to rent out the second small room to a business for additional income, as the rice shop is flourishing. They have also started group enterprises in the center. In order to do so, they are looking into constructing a coconut-leaf shed on the (currently flat concrete) roof for storage and additional meeting space. ■

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# Mother Centers

## Mother Centers International Network (MINE)

**MOTHER CENTERS** Mother Centers are self-managed public spaces in the neighborhood where mothers and their children meet on a daily basis in an informal atmosphere.<sup>1</sup> They serve as “community living rooms” where mothers can relax and meet other women from different backgrounds and participate in a range of activities, trainings and support services, and where flexible hours of childcare are provided on a drop-in basis for all ages. Mother Centers are based on participation, and on the belief that “everybody is good at least one thing that they can contribute.” The centers create a culture of friendship and mutual support, enrich social cohesion in neighborhoods, and enhance the recognition of motherhood in society. They are also places where women organize to participate in policy making and local governance.

Mother Centers were created in Germany in 1980 as a result of a research study conducted for the German Youth Institute (DJI) by Monica Jaeckel. The resulting book, documenting the successful experience of the first three pilot Mother Centers funded by the federal government in a simple story-telling format, led to the quick adoption of the idea, bringing together women of different class backgrounds to create their own Mother Centers throughout the country. There are now 400 Mother Centers of various sizes in Germany.

The purpose of creating Mother Centers was to mobilize and support “women’s everyday expertise and to advocate for a greater role for women in public decision making. Its purpose is to counter the alienation from public sphere that women as caregivers suffer from. While the traditional feminist route to participation in public life has been more in the areas of professionalization and labor market participation, the efforts of the Mother Centers are more oriented towards creating mechanisms for non-professional women to participate in local planning, claiming public spaces and getting the city to respond to the needs of these women and children.

Rather than providing professional social services in which professional expertise is remunerated, the Mother Centers’ efforts are focused towards creating self-managed initiatives in which women’s everyday knowledge is mobilized and advocate for state support to transform neighborhoods into communities that will support the needs of mothers and children. The core of the Mother Centers is a daily drop-in coffee shop which includes childcare. The centers create a platform to bring resources and talents back into a public space in the community, out of the confined area of private homes of women who stay at home to take care of their children.”<sup>2</sup>

Mother Centers are based on participation believing that ‘everybody is good at least one thing—that they can contribute.’

**mine**  
Mother Centers International Network for Empowerment

### CONTACT:

[www.monikajaeckel.com/wordpress/2009/06/01/welcome/](http://www.monikajaeckel.com/wordpress/2009/06/01/welcome/)  
[www.mine.cc](http://www.mine.cc)



The Mother Center movement's alternative approach challenged the conventional wisdom in the fields of social work and social welfare that view mothers and families as passive clients. Its greatest success was "the rechanneling of resources from social work programs to go directly into the hands of grassroots women's groups. In the case of Germany, this change in public policy has resulted in the reform of the German Youth Welfare Legislation, that now includes a paragraph on funding for family self-help initiatives."<sup>3</sup>

### **MOTHER CENTERS INTERNATIONAL NETWORK FOR EMPOWERMENT**

Networking with groups of women with similar ideas, Mother Centers have now spread to 22 countries, including Netherlands, Austria, Switzerland, Liechtenstein, Italy, Czech Republic, Slovak Republic, Bosnia, Bulgaria as well as USA, Canada, Kenya, Rwanda, and the Philippines. These groups formed their international network Mother Centers International Network for Empowerment (MINE) in 2000.

In different contexts, Mother Centers serve different purposes: In Western Europe they help bring families out of isolation and motherhood out of marginalization; in post-socialist societies they support the development of civil society from the bottom up; in post conflict areas, like Bosnia, Mother Centers have created opportunities to reweave the war-torn social fabric. For the First Nation population in Canada, they have created collective income generating projects; in the United States' African American communities, Mother Centers help welfare

recipients reorient their lives towards self sufficiency; in the slums of Nairobi, they offer a safe place, meals, and medical services for mothers and street children; and in the Philippines they provide a "home away from home" for rural migrant workers in industrial zones.

MINE, registered in Stuttgart, Germany, is an international network to facilitate world-wide cooperation and exchange between the 800 Mother Centers

in different parts of the world. It connects the Mother Center movement to other organizations active in improving the quality of life for mothers, families and communities and in enhancing their public influence, as well as to donors and fund-raising opportunities, offers them information and technical support, organizes learning opportunities for Mother Centers like the Grassroots Women's International Academies (GWIA) that was started together with GROOTS International, and initiates debates relevant to the Mother Center movement worldwide.

To achieve these goals, MINE uses a range of tools and strategies, such as peer learning exchanges and study visits, trainings and workshops, regular newsletters, stimulation of new Mother Center initiatives and consultation for existing ones and national and regional networks, consultation for governmental and other authorities on how to support Mother Centers, pilot projects, representation of Mother Centers at international events and in international networks, analysis of the situation of and lobbying for mothers, children and families in different contexts, documentation of Mother Centers and their projects through publications and exhibits, and media and PR work to enhance the visibility and recognition of the Mother Center movement.

MINE is accredited as "Best Practice" by UN-Habitat and has received the Dubai International Award for Best Practices to Improve the Living Environment for "strengthening of the capacity of civil society to revitalize local neighborhoods and revive community life." ■

## Germany

# Mother Centers Stuttgart and the Eltern-Kind-Zentrum-Stuttgart-West e.V.

**MOTHER CENTER STUTTGART**, a self-organized, autonomous group of grassroots women, was started in 1986 in a room in the basement of a building where they met once a week. Today, it anchors the Eltern-Kind-Zentrum-Stuttgart-West, or Center for Elderly and Children Stuttgart West (EKiZ), in a brand new 11 million-Euro building, and has recently opened a second Mother Center above the oldest toy store in the middle of Stuttgart in collaboration with the store owner. Mother Center Stuttgart was the visionary organization behind the development of the EKiZ, the intergenerational and intercultural house for women and their families, and worked collaboratively with the architect, partner institutions and social service representatives during a three-year long participatory design process until the building was completed in 2001. This cooperative social service building houses an elderly care facility, a city childcare center, the office of a home-based elderly care organization, as well as the Mother Center itself. The center operates an alternative parent-run childcare, a second hand store, cooks lunch for 70 people every day, and serves as a drop-in socializing place for its members. It is a place where young and old, families and singles, locals and immigrants can meet and share ideas. It is a site of political participation and community action.<sup>4</sup>

### MISSION

The mission of Mother Center Stuttgart, EKiZ, is to create a lively, caring and active community that supports the idea of a new kind of public family outside the biological family. Approaching the idea of family from a broader perspective is necessary to do what the families needs, create a dialogue culture between seemingly incompatible worlds, and give a voice to those who have never before been heard, allowing them to be part of the solution.

Mother Center Stuttgart's underlying philosophy is, "Everybody can manage something especially well and in concert with others." They have created the term "everyday expert" to define what they do, and emphasize sharing what they have with others, health, and equal rights in their work.

From a community living room to an intergenerational center: supporting the evolving forms of family and community...

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## PRIMARY ACTIVITIES AND USERS

- Demand-based services for families, such as alternative childcare created by parents, the daily lunch service, information for parents so that life, job and family will be compatible;
- Training and income-generation for women, such as baby-sitter training and management of a second hand store;
- Creating new contracts and ties between generations through different activities;
- Strengthening of women and families for greater participation and influence in a democratic society, and advocacy for a new definition of family and greater public acceptance and appreciation of reproductive work in the private and public life;
- Partner dialogues—local to local—to learn from and with families as an accepted attitude and structure in Stuttgart and Baden-Württemberg.

The center is open to everyone: women, neighbors, even other occupants of the building. Membership is not required but the group has 800 members nonetheless, and every day, the center has 200 visitors of all ages, independent of membership.

## NETWORKS

Mother Center Stuttgart is part of a regional group, Baden-Württemberg Mother Centers, and the national network of Mother Centers that operate to make grassroots women's concerns heard and to elicit political change. It is also a member of the Mother Centers International Network for Empowerment (MINE) and GROOTS International. International networks are important for peer exchange and learning since there are very few grassroots groups in Germany, other than Mother Centers.

## FUNDING

The 11 million-Euro Intergenerational House building was funded through the municipality by the local Brothers Schmid Foundation. In 2001, Mother Center negotiated a contract with the city to get steady funding for the services it provides. This funding now covers its rent, program budget and 80 percent of one staff member's salary. Since 2006, EKIZ is part of the National Intergenerational House Program; it has a five-year grant. In addition, Mother Center has a secondhand store and rents out its space to different groups to organize events as a way of generating income for its own activities.





### TENURE, OWNERSHIP, AND MANAGEMENT

Mother Center does not own the space; it is leased from the municipality. Its contract with the city for the services it provides, the citywide support and reputation of the Mother Center for its good work, and the documentation of its membership and role in the creation of EKiz make up the basis for the group's security of tenure.

### DESCRIPTION OF THE SPACE

This is a five-story, 5,500-square meter, new reinforced concrete structure built after a three-year participatory design process. It includes indoor and outdoor recreational and working spaces, apartments for the elderly and an office for assisted living services, a kindergarden, childcare services, and the local mother center.

The social meeting spaces in the building are important. The EKiz café—originally planned to be housed on 2nd floor—was moved to ground floor, and serves as a public living room within the city district, making the life of families visible and easily accessible at ground level. Up to 90 people can eat at the café, including families, as parents pick up the children from daycare, those engaged in voluntary and professional work at the center, and the occupants of the housing for the elderly, returning from shopping. The open entrance hall was transformed from a wide passageway into, at different times of the day, a cozy, lively, and entertaining, or quiet sitting area for the visitors, with an espresso bar at reception. Parents, instead of quickly dropping off their children and rushing off to work, now linger around for “family business” and conversation with other parents or the elderly occupants. It is the center of the Intergenerational House. In October 2004, when a meeting space was needed for an international local-to-local dialogue, a long table like an Italian family table was set up in the hallway to accommodate the guests. The children of the day nursery love to run from the ramp on the first floor into the garden. The garden is not divided into lots, as originally planned, but it is used as an open space for everybody.



### Background

Mother Centers were developed to counter the alienation of mothers in public life by claiming public spaces to support and recognize their contributions to the society as “everyday experts” and to advocate for a greater role for women in public decision making.

The Stuttgart Mother Center was started by Andrea Laux in 1986. A single welfare mother herself, Laux was doing odd jobs for a progressive social welfare organization in the mid-1980s, when she was asked by the director, who had noticed her energy and ideas, to lead an experimental single mothers program. She had read the Mother Centers book and was inspired to start one together with the women in her group. Andrea Laux describes how they started and expanded the Mother Center Stuttgart as follows: “My Mother Center in Germany now looks very big, however it started small. The group who started consisted of women who had moved to the city and we were welfare clients. I read the book about Mother Centers and thought that it was exactly what I needed and that we could do it well. We started by gathering a group. We put up notices in the supermarket and asked women and so we got a very mixed group. It was not just women on welfare but middle class women as well. We managed to get a space (in the basement of a progressive social welfare organization) for free that we could use once a week.

The first activity we did was singing together with our children. This way my son learned a lot of songs that I did not know. To relieve the burden of work for all of us, one woman would cook for the whole group so that we would save time and money by not having each of us to cook individually. Now (23) years later, this has grown (into) a complete restaurant, and we provide food for the whole neighborhood. Making music together and eating together helped to create a group. We were a very diverse group and we were not at all politically active, but as a group we grew stronger. All the shy women were learning and growing. After a while just one afternoon was not enough for us and we wanted to have the space more often

so we went to the mayor to ask. The group elected me to represent them and I was so shy it was very difficult for me but I learned a lot from representing the group.”<sup>5</sup>

Andrea Laux and the mothers were successful in convincing the city council. When a council member tried to put down their request as “subsidized coffee drinking,” their response was, “Do you have a mother? Do you know what she does?” Once their rent was secured, the group could move to a new and larger basement space in 1989 and start meeting every day. A few years later they had two basement spaces. “...With time we developed our dreams and our vision. We needed more space and were lucky that an organization had an apartment for rent. The city has helped us with paying the rent, all the other costs we needed to pay ourselves. At that point we sat together with the active women to discuss what to do. We decided that we would start a shop with second hand clothes. This is a way so that families can buy cheap clothes and for the center it was a way to generate income. The other thing we started was a food cooperative. By buying food as a group we could buy healthy food at very good prices directly from the farm. The members of the cooperative buy the food for a lower price than what they pay in the shop and still there is a little margin left for the women who do the work of organizing the food cooperative...

... All the activities and income generating ideas started little by little. We had an idea or an emergency situation which forced us to do something. This is how the childcare started. An emergency situation with one of the mothers required childcare so we started it. For some of the activities we got help from other Mother Centers. We exchanged ideas with the other groups and learned from them.

After a while we got more and more ideas for activities. There was a woman who wanted to celebrate a baptism and her house was too small for all the guests so she used the space of the Mother Center. Then we also started to do it for other people, they



could rent the space to celebrate parties and have catering and childcare as well.

Sometimes we have courses. They start if somebody says 'I have a skill, I can teach the others.' Or when somebody says they want to learn something. This way we have started different courses and trainings. I learned English this way. In many centers they have computer courses or trainings in health issues. One woman can do yoga and she teaches the others. Dental hygiene is another... We invite a midwife to explain about the things related to pregnancy. In my Mother Center we also have many activities for youth. We invite people to tell them about HIV and how to prevent it. The youngsters can learn from us how to be a good baby sitter. We give a certificate if they have learned everything well...

Singing was the first thing we started with, and still, every week young and old come in and join and sing the traditional songs and that is very much fun and brings people together. On Monday we do sport and all can join in. That is especially important for the development of the children. In our country the young do not move enough anymore and that is not good for their health."<sup>6</sup>

The mothers' vision for a larger and intergenerational space developed as the group participated in a number of international meetings and peer exchanges organized by GROOTS International, the Huairou Commission, as well as national and regional meetings of the Mother Centers Network. "Bringing

Habitat Home" was one of the campaigns that they were involved in which strengthened their interaction with the municipality after the U.N. Habitat Istanbul +5 meeting.

Having the space helps the group in a number of ways. In addition to everyday support, it is a base for the Mother Center to achieve its advocacy efforts. For example, in the last few years, members of the city council, the national parliament, the mayor's office and representatives of international corporations have gathered at the center to dialogue with mothers on how to make German society more family friendly and supportive to both the young and aging generations. Mother Center Stuttgart has also organized leadership training sessions for the staff and future managers of two large private companies in the city.

Mother Centers continue to be the only places in the city where mothers can organize without bureaucratic oversight, support each other, and interact with a diverse group of people of different ages and backgrounds. Without the center, women and their children would be isolated. Now they are creating intergenerational and intercultural communities and advocating for greater roles for grassroots women and their families in local decision making.

"Here I am part of the solution;  
we work on eye level."

— Mother Center Stuttgart member

"We would love to buy the building in the backyard, because our house is limited and the times are changing. We need space for more flexible childcare and daycare for elderly as well..."

The Intergenerational House was a unique project with a 'special' status, implying that it would be difficult to replicate because of several unique elements that came together at the right time. **MOTHER CENTER STUTTGART**'s vision "to create a living space which leaves room for a lively, thoughtful and cozy mixture of big families" could be realized because there were social service groups that needed a similar space: "A small organization which takes care of people in the privacy of their home but had the dream of 'staying right in the middle of life;' a big welfare institution that 'wanted to try new ways of sheltered housing,' and a municipal child care service that 'wished to be a place in the neighborhood where the whole family feels at home.'" There was a "female mayor (who) dreamt of transferring her own experience of a big family of origin to modern ways of life, and a foundation which dreamt of creating future things with its financial savings."

Still, it was not an easy process. First, while there was heavy investment in facilitating the participatory planning and design of the center, the professionals were well-compensated for participating in this process, but the grassroots women from the Mother Center were not. Second, after the design phase, there was no support for or any attention paid to facilitating the collaborative management of the center or to funding its management. The Mother Center

had to struggle every step of the way to develop good relations with the social service agencies, who at first said they were unable to handle being in the same space and working as equals with the mothers. In addition they had to find resources to meet their increased operational expenses. Moreover, the relations with the municipality could be strained at times. They fought hard to get a contract and permanent funding for their work. The process taught the mothers to keep better records and document their work. The small annual membership fee of 22 Euros was created mainly for such political reasons.

Mother Center Stuttgart has now grown so much that it needs to hire staff to manage larger amounts of money, paperwork, and communications and day-to-day tasks. Therefore, the group is planning to meet within a year to develop a creative management structure that fits its values and principles.

Mother Center Stuttgart's long-term vision for the city and the country is to refine social services and support for women and families. Andrea Laux indicates that as the number of elderly is increasing, fertility rates are dropping and diversity is increasing in Germany, it is critical to develop a strong sense of community and a new concept and understanding of "family" in the society by bringing together people of all generations and cultures. ■

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## Czech Republic

# The Czech Mother Centers Network

The **CZECH MOTHER CENTERS NETWORK**, is a membership organization of 319 Mother Centers throughout the country. The first Czech Mother Center opened in 1992 in Prague, after a group of women leaders participated in an exchange visit in Germany and learned about the basic organizing principles of the German Mother Center's self-help movement. What started as a small group of mothers getting together to take care of their children in a supportive environment outside their homes, is now "a creative and sophisticated civil society movement of women, who have reshaped through their own experience how 'the personal is political.'"<sup>1</sup> As the concept spread by word of mouth, hundreds of Mother Centers emerged in villages and towns across the Czech Republic. In 2001, the groups came together to formally establish the Czech Mother Centers Network (CMCN). While the Mother Centers focus on the practical needs of families with young children, the network provides support to member groups and serves as a national platform to advocate for the incorporation of the values and rights of mothers in local governance.<sup>2</sup>

### MISSION

The goals of the Czech Mother Centers Network are to:

- Bring parenting and child-raising into the public domain by recognizing and making visible the social contributions women make through child care and rearing;
- Create dialogue mechanisms that enable citizen-government engagement and collaboration; and
- Promote new forms of community and infrastructure development that reflects the needs of families with children.

### PRIMARY ACTIVITIES AND USERS

- Provision of support and methodological guidance to its members and the establishment of new mother centers
- Coordination of projects and campaigns of Czech mother centers, and organizing seminars and conferences
- Cooperation with government agencies, local governments and non profit organizations to promote the values and mission of the network

The office is a drop-in resource center for all of its members, as well as groups interested in setting up new mother centers.

Politicizing mothers' care-giving roles, advocating a "family friendly society" ...



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## NETWORKS

The Czech Mother Centers Network is a member of the Huairou Commission, GROOTS International, and MINE (Mother Centers International Network for Empowerment).

## FUNDING

The basic operational costs of the center are met by membership fees. Staff and volunteers provide all the service and work on projects and other activities. The group gets support for its projects and programs from the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs, and internationally, from the European Union and different foundations.

## TENURE, OWNERSHIP, AND MANAGEMENT

The office space is leased. The president, staff and volunteers use and maintain the space on a daily basis. The network is run by a Governing Council, made up of a president and four vice presidents, elected by the member Mother Centers, and regional coordinators. There is also an oversight commission.

## DESCRIPTION OF THE SPACE

The first Mother Center in Prague was opened at the YMCA in 1992. The Czech Mother Center Network's activities, however, were conducted for long time (until 2005) out of the apartment of its president, Rut Kolínská. When the network was able to access sufficient funding, it moved to a new space, converting a 3-room apartment into its offices.



# The Process, Partnerships & Accomplishments

## Background

From 1948 to 1989, the Czech Republic was part of the Soviet system. During the socialist regime, Czech women had access to social services that allowed them to reconcile their parenting roles with work, even though women did not have the same employment opportunities as men, and some were not happy with the 'collectivized' child rearing model.<sup>3</sup> After the 'Velvet Revolution' in 1989, the transition to a market economy led to the abolition of universal social benefits to families with children. The women

were marginalized and faced with new challenges within the framework of new social policies. The government's new allowance program to support families with young children meant that one of the parents, i.e. the mother, would have to stay at home to care for the children for the first four years. The program required that the families apply every three months to prove their eligibility for the allowance, and did not allow the use of childcare facilities for more than three days a month. These requirements isolated the mothers socially and also reduced their ability to find jobs

after a four-year parental leave. Mothers who valued their parenting role were also marginalized by the “Western feminists” who viewed women’s care giving roles in the family as a key source of their oppression.

The Czech Mothers Network evolved within this context from the Prague Mothers Group, a small, informal organization of 20 women, who had started meeting secretly prior to 1989, into a broad civil society movement. Initially, the Mothers Group was concerned with the impact of urban air pollution on young children, and after the ‘Velvet Revolution’ they started considering new directions. Learning about the German Mother Centers model, the group requested a workshop be conducted for women from Czech Republic. In 1991, forty women participated in a peer learning exchange organized by the German Youth Institute and German Mother Centers in Munich. They were moved by the grassroots self help efforts, collaboration, and transparency.

Inspired by what they saw and learned from the German mothers’ self-help initiatives, the group started its first Mother Center in the YMCA on Na Porici Street in Prague. As in Mother Center Stuttgart, the center had a large window to the street so that the passers by could see and learn about this unique public gathering space for women and children. The concept spread by word of mouth with the help of radio programs and newspaper articles. The group realized early on the importance of partnering with the media to get visibility and spread their message.

Women from around the country started calling Rut Kolínská’s home to find out more about the process and set up their own centers. They learned that they had to be creative and work collaboratively in establishing their Mother Center. It required a range of skills: identifying a space, reaching out to the community, learning about the laws and regulations, contacting and negotiating with authorities, devising ways of getting funding and the necessary permits, developing and running programs and activities, and managing the center. Learning to take responsibility and leadership in this process, and later for their own lives, was an empowering experience for the most women that helped build up their confidence and encouraged them to also get involved local planning and governance issues.

*“That the mother center was not a service provider was astonishing to me when I first started coming to the center. That we were actually invited and expected to participate in the running of the center was a real challenge. I realized how much I had expected everything to already be settled and that nothing could be changed.”*

*“As Prague mothers, we always met on the street... With the Mother Centre, We did not think about how we were trying to change the society, it was simply about being together with others like myself.”*

*“We had to talk a lot with each other and learn to negotiate just to come to agreements on questions of aesthetics, which colors to use and which furniture to put in the center. There was an amazing amount of learning involved in this... The way we learned to deal with our differences and conflicts not relying on directives from any higher authority can really be described as a daily school of democracy. And this applies to the children as well.”*

*“The more we develop our community in our mother center the more I have become sensitive to issues in the larger community.”*

*“We became active in our local hospital, challenging the notion that there is only one right posture for giving birth, now women have more choices concerning childbirth. We also made it possible for women to stay overnight with their children who are in the hospital. This was the result of discussions we had in a group on women and health in our center.”<sup>4</sup>*

As the individual centers evolved parallel to the growth of the network, “mothers began to draw attention to the need for community improvements, such as public parks and playgrounds and cultural center. Several Mother Center leaders became active in municipal planning processes, [lobbying] the government to create child-friendly public facilities, policies and working conditions.”<sup>5</sup>

“How to start” seminars that brought representatives from different Mother Centers and interested women together to share their experiences were first

started in 1995. The rapid expansion of the Mother Centers drew public attention to the policies and practices that had socially and economically marginalized the mothers and excluded them from the public arena.

The core group kept in close touch with the German mothers, especially the ones from the Stuttgart Mother Center, and participated in the Federal Congress of Mother Centers in Germany in 1993 and 1996. At these meetings, the Czech women learned about the importance of partnering with the local and national governments and participating in local planning processes for access to resources and to voice their concerns.

However, it was a conflict with the authorities of a small town in 1997 that brought the Prague mothers into direct dialogue with the government and to move on to the next phase of their organizing. The administration of a small town was claiming that the Mother Center was a childcare facility, and therefore the mothers could not use it for more than three days a month if they wanted to benefit from the family allowance. The long but fruitless negotiations of Rut Kolínská and Jitka Herrmannová with members of the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs made them realize that it was time to think about their advocacy efforts more systematically. First, neither Kolínská nor the Prague group had any legal authority to represent the network of Mother Centers. Second, they needed to plan and be better prepared for their advocacy efforts, which meant finding allies within the government who could understand and support their cause. It also meant that the Czech Mother Centers had to come together to “consolidate their identity, clearly articulate their principles and values, and hold a vision of the changes they want to bring about” so that they could be strong and clear in their arguments and negotiations.<sup>6</sup> This led to a national gathering of Mother Centers in 1999, and again in 2001, to discuss the “formation of an efficient organization to protect the interests of the network of Mother Centers.”<sup>7</sup>

The Czech Mother Centers formally registered with the Ministry of the Interior in 2001, and in early 2002, the first plenary assembly of the network elected its three-member governing council. As the

network continued to grow and expand its operations, its organizational structure had to be adjusted. In 2006, the governing council was restructured to have simpler structure—Presidium (a president and four vice presidents) and an oversight commission. The activities of the network are coordinated by different working committees made up of staff and leaders of Mother Centers.

Linking to and exchanging with like-minded networks helped strengthen the network within the country. There were two such accomplishments in 1999. The first was the bus trip that fourteen Czech Mothers and eight government officials took to Stuttgart, Germany, to observe the partnership between German Mother Centers and local and national governments. This learning exchange provided a great opportunity for the women and officials to also have long informal discussions during the trip and understand each other’s views.

The same year, the Czech Mother Centers Network joined GROOTS International and the Huairou Commission, two global networks with similar values and principles. This opened up new opportunities for the network to learn new strategies and tools from grassroots groups from around the world, to amplify its message, and make its members feel part of a larger movement than their own community. For example, after participating in the Grassroots Women’s International Academy in New York and a Local to Local Dialogue in 2001, a tool developed by the Huairou Commission for grassroots women’s groups to engage their local governments, the Czech Mother Centers Network started its own Local to Local dialogues. Rut Kolínská’s receipt of the European Woman of the Year Award in 2003 and the Social Entrepreneur Award from the Schwabb Foundation in 2006 further strengthened the network’s visibility and legitimacy in the Czech Republic.

In 2004, the year that the government declared as the Year of the Family, Czech Mother Centers Network launched an effective campaign on “Family Friendly Society” to advance its agenda. The campaign drew attention to the ways in which the government and the private sector can support families through flexible jobs, city planning around the safety of women and children, and child-friendly public

facilities and services. The media attention also highlighted the importance of the care-giving roles of grassroots women and of supporting them to voice their concerns and solutions in the public decision-making process. The recognition of the campaign by the European Union Council for Equal Opportunities as “promoting innovation and practical ways of advancing equal opportunity in the Czech Republic” also helped draw the government’s attention.<sup>8</sup>

The 15th anniversary of the Czech Mother Centers in 2007 marked an important benchmark in the

evolution of the network. A congratulatory letter from the former Czech President Vaclav Havel praised “the network’s contribution to improving the quality of family life and promoting a democratic civil society in the Czech Republic in a key transitional period.”<sup>9</sup> The Minister of Labor and Social Affairs, who attended the network’s Family Friendly Awards ceremony, announced that starting in 2008, the government will jointly endorse these awards, and further stated that “all our future activity will show that we are serious about transforming our approach towards families.”<sup>10</sup>

“The more we develop our community in our mother center the more I have become sensitive to issues in the larger community.”

## Challenges & Plans for the Future

The evolution of the **CZECH MOTHER CENTERS NETWORK** is an example of how grassroots women’s groups claiming public space at the community level can upscale their work to claim political spaces for women at the national level. The Czech Mother Centers Network plans to continue growing “step by step to be a strong, professional organization” and expand its activities with the support and collaboration of its members. However, as Kolínská indicates, their work has expanded so

much that at this phase of their organizing “it is no more possible to do it on one’s knees.” Without an autonomous office and resource center that enables the groups to come together around practical and advocacy issues, it would be hard to sustain their work. Since a steady and independent source of funding is also critical to maintain their autonomy and space, the network is now considering developing a social enterprise to finance its activities. ■

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## Canada

# Aboriginal Mother Centre and Society

The **ABORIGINAL MOTHER CENTRE (AMC)**, initiated by a group of urban aboriginal women, is located on the edge of Vancouver's downtown core—a difficult place to live. Here, life can be especially difficult for a woman who is aboriginal, disconnected from community support, and trying to raise a family alone where poverty, high rates of intravenous drug use, intergenerational homelessness, and family violence impact health and well-being. Here, aboriginal moms (non-aboriginal are also welcome) from all tribes and affiliations, often far from their own rural communities, find a home: an open, urban living room and empowerment for themselves and their families.

"AMCS supports self-help and preventative programs, in a high-risk group of aboriginal, young, single mothers on and off reserve, that foster the link between mothers and their families in a sustainable community."<sup>1</sup>

## MISSION

For aboriginal women and their children living in Vancouver, British Columbia, to work together, combat discrimination, family violence, poverty, and the destruction of the environment, and to overcome challenges to take their rightful place in their own communities and in the larger society.

## PRIMARY ACTIVITIES AND USERS

The families who use the Centre face tremendous challenges and show tremendous resiliency. AMC knows it is most effective when it is directed by community members. Like Mother Centers throughout the world, the AMC involves community members in all aspects of programs and decision-making processes. Activities involve:

The Physical: food, shelter, clothing, health

- Women's drop-in open living room
- Food security (distribution and meal program serves over 1,500 meals each year)
- Food safety, nutrition and child safety classes
- Public health nurse provides dental, immunization, referrals
- Traditional healing
- Cold weather emergency services
- Thrift shop (clothing and furniture)
- Transitional housing, referrals, and housing outreach
- Future permanent rental or cooperative housing

Under one roof:  
An urban home for  
aboriginal women  
and their children.



## CONTACT:

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The Social and Cultural: connecting to culture, community, and family:

- A youth drop-in provides a safe alternative to the streets
- Traditional parenting skills training
- Child care, including a licensed 3–5 year old daycare
- Sexually exploited youth program respectfully works to create a safe, loving environment where sex workers can build self-esteem, and find new, healthy ways to make money
- Child apprehension prevention and facility for supervised visits

The Personal: building strength, resilience, and capacity:

- Skills training (computer, cooking, business)
- Counseling and advocacy
- Social enterprise: Mama's Wall Street Studio
- Women's governance collective
- Peer counselling: mom's teams and parent-to-parent
- Craft and cultural activities
- Political education and advocacy training

### NETWORKS

- Native Women's Association of Canada
- Mother Centres International Network for Empowerment (MINE)

### FUNDING, TENURE, AND OWNERSHIP:

In 2001, AMCS first rented space in the current building. Seven years later, after several attempts to purchase, the building and the one adjacent were bought by the provincial government with the proviso that AMCS would be able to take over the mortgage. Then, in partnership with Lu'ma Native Housing Society and Builders Without Borders as the lead fund-raising agency, AMCS embarked on a \$7 million renovation project, which included land purchase and construction of 16 units of transitional housing. Operational funding comes from government-supported programs, private subscription as in the case of the licensed daycare, the social enterprises, and private donations. An endowment fund, administered by another provincial foundation, will be established and the interest will fund programs and scholarships.



## DESCRIPTION OF SPACE

The Aboriginal Mother Centre is housed within a 30 year old concrete building in a light industrial and residential area near an active port, with 28,000 square feet on three stories. The building was originally a marine school, later a business center, and by time the AMCS moved in, it was in serious need of upgrading. Originally occupying about a third of the building, AMCS has since expanded to take over two floors. In 2009, renovation began on 80 percent of the building, including seismic upgrading; conversion of the third floor offices and classrooms into 16 transitional studio living units for single mothers and their children; adding the new dining room and commercial and teaching kitchen, administration offices, meeting space, childcare and open living room on the second; and renovations to support social enterprise activities and retail rental suites on the first floor. The sloping site provides ground access to both the first and second floors. Large windows allow good light into all the rooms.



## The Process, Partnerships & Accomplishments

"And then the penny dropped, and I thought that this is it! This is an amazing concept. I liked the concept, the name, that the space was open. It was bringing women out of isolation and creating their own space and having ownership of the space. It was the sense of self-help, of pulling oneself up by the boot straps that came through. Then I got more information from the other Mother Centres and the other women in my community said, "This is something we have always dreamed of." — Penny Irons, founder

### Background

Young (under 18), single parent aboriginal women are particularly marginalized. Statistically, this group is at high risk for involvement in family violence, alcohol and drug dependency and long term, welfare dependency. Forty-six percent of aboriginal children live in single-parent families in urban centers in British Columbia, more than twice the general population. Forty percent of off-reserve aboriginal children live in poverty.<sup>2</sup> The traditional women's programs that exist in Canada, such as women's centers on

campuses, family centers and YW/YMCA centers, have generally not attracted these young aboriginal mothers.<sup>3</sup> People who live off reserve, or, off of lands that have been set aside for the use and benefit of an aboriginal band in accordance with the Canadian Indian Act, often lose their band entitlements and their social safety net.

### Aboriginal Mother Centre Society

The Aboriginal Mother Centre Society, founded in 2000, was born from both the Mother Center concept

in Europe, and the Indian Homemakers Association of BC, which, founded in 1969, is the oldest provincial native women's organization.<sup>4</sup> The Aboriginal Mother Centre started in 2001, when AMCS found a suitable building in an ideal location. Situated in a depressed area on the fringe of the historic downtown on a major bus route and close to traditionally low-income residential areas, the building offered a great deal of space for relatively low rent. Founder Penny Irons, along with other women community leaders, had just visited the Women and Family Centers formed by KEDV in Turkey after the Marmara earthquake, and two German Mothers Centres in Germany while on a study tour organized by the International Center for Sustainable Development and the Foundation for the Support of Women's Work (KEDV).<sup>5</sup> They saw and understood the importance of space controlled by women, where women can organize without being turned into clients.<sup>6</sup>

Despite having an operational budget in excess of \$500,000 per year, under funding restrictions, operational money could not be used for investment in building ownership. The first proposed purchase and

renovation was at a cost of \$1 million. By 2008, when the provincial government was able to buy the building and the one adjacent, the price had doubled. Under the AMCS partnership agreement with Lu'ma Native Housing Society, AMCS will eventually take over the mortgage. And, following the success of a complex fundraising campaign, the extensive renovation will be completed in 2010. A second phase, slated to begin within two years will provide permanent housing on the adjacent property, which will be purchased at the same time.

AMCS is governed by a board composed of both professional and community members, who are aboriginal and non-aboriginal. The AMC Women's Collective, as part of the board, provides the opportunity for all women to participate in governing the center. Over 50 partners and hundreds of individuals—from the construction industry to the many levels of government, and from the social service provider community to philanthropic groups—have supported the AMC. The social enterprise, called Mama's Wall Street Studio, is wholly owned and operated by the AMCS.

## Challenges & Plans for the Future

The **ABORIGINAL MOTHER CENTRE** building is currently under renovation. The renovation of all three floors is a large project for the AMCS. In the meantime, the center's activities have moved to another location, at the Vancouver Aboriginal Friendship Centre. To increase its capacity to manage and operate the various programs that will be run out of the building, the AMCS has formed partnerships with other non-profit aboriginal societies. It has also attracted support

from the broader philanthropic community. However, the magnitude of the project and the time necessary for its completion will delay the transfer of the title to AMCS. During the interim, the provincial government will retain ownership of the building. This could mean that part of the building may be rented out to other groups not compatible with the AMCS. The challenge for the group now is how to maintain its autonomy and control over space in a larger building. ■

### REFERENCES

All quotations are from the survey response unless indicated otherwise.

<sup>1</sup> AMCS Funding Brief.

<sup>2</sup> Campaign 2000. City of Vancouver.

<sup>3</sup> Aboriginal Mother Center Brief. 2000.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.kedv.org.tr/>

<sup>6</sup> 2003 Federal Homelessness Initiative (Government Funding Proposal).

## Canada

# Centre for Northern Families The Yellowknife Women's Society

The **YELLOWKNIFE WOMEN'S SOCIETY (YWS)** and its **CENTRE FOR NORTHERN FAMILIES (CNF)** have a unique approach to community development and the essential services for women and families that they provide. The CNF practices a family support model. The majority of women who go to the center are aboriginal, Inuit or other members of the ethno-cultural community. They are often marginalized and multi-stressed, struggling with the challenges of moving from isolated northern communities to an urban setting or making a difficult transition from their home country to Canada. Most are either unlikely or unable to access mainstream community and health resources. In this challenging context, CNF is a safe place for women in a peer-supported atmosphere.

### MISSION

To support the self-empowerment of women so they can develop their goals, achieve wellness, enjoy equality, and be recognized for the contribution they make in the community.

### PRIMARY ACTIVITIES AND USERS

- Emergency shelter and transitional housing for women
- Medical and community healthcare
- Family support and parenting services
- Early childhood development
- Licensed childcare for 20 children
- Youth-led girl empowerment groups
- Youth networking and art groups focused on mental health issues
- Services for immigrants and new Canadians
- Yellowknife Inuit Katujjiqatiglit office

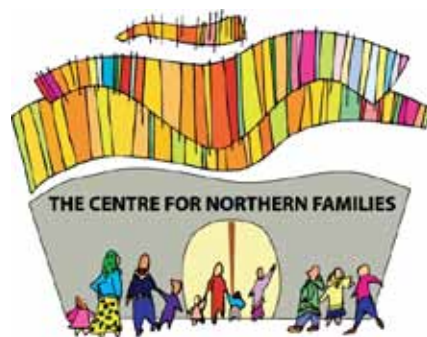
### NETWORKS

Local networks include: Yellowknife Homelessness Coalition, Family Violence Coalition, Alternatives North, Child and Family Community Resource Centre, Canada/Northwest FASD Network, and NWT Food First.

National networks include: Feminist Alliance for International Action, GROOTS Canada, Women's Housing Equality Network, Canadian Homelessness Research Network, National Committee on Women and Housing, Campaign 2000, Canada Without Poverty, Healthy Living Issue Group, and Taking It Global.

International networks include: GROOTS International, and Indigenous Women's Network

Supporting women's empowerment within traditional values of a northern community

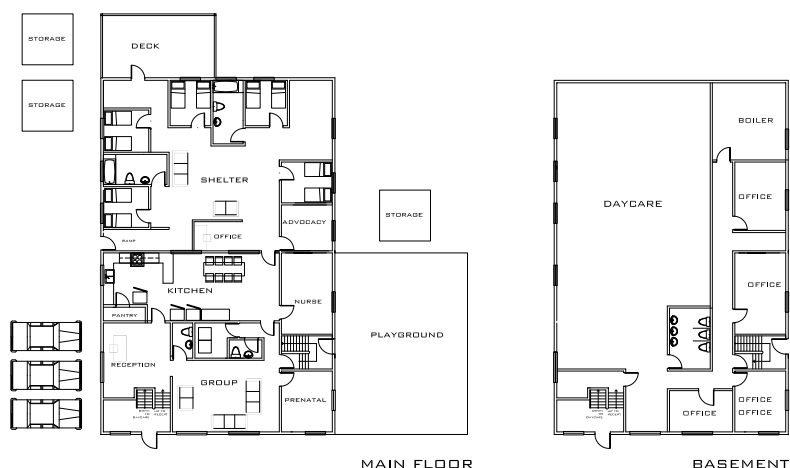


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## FUNDING

The space is owned by the NWT Housing Corporation, an agency of the government of the Northwest Territories and leased to the YWS at \$48,000 per year. The CNF operates through funding primarily generated through project contributions from the federal and territorial governments, donations from individuals and the business sector, as well as program fees. The center also has a social enterprise, a mini-golf course, which operates during the summer.



## DESCRIPTION OF SPACE

The center is housed in a one-story building with a basement. It is a wood frame building of 4,500 square feet (about 418 square meters) with street access from both floors. The main floor is divided into three parts, featuring a reception area, a large living room that is used for program and group meeting space, and an office shared with two medical programs (the Prenatal Nutrition Program and the Health Clinic). A kitchen runs the full length of the building and provides open laundry access, and the emergency shelter's five bedrooms have the capacity to house up to 23 women every night. The lower level has the daycare, program offices, and mechanical systems. Both floors have large windows that provide good natural light. Outside, there is a deck, garden, playground, and small storage for residents.



"The building is a nice size, not big, not small. At the back there is a large, open space, which is the shelter. There are couches, a television, blankets, pillows on the ground, and several women hanging out. There were children playing and running around. The atmosphere was very informal."

— Katie Meyer<sup>1</sup>

The Northwest Territories is the land of endless winter nights and summer midnight sun, where gold and diamonds have shaped the economy for decades. But numbers tell a more exacting story about the challenges facing residents of the Northwest Territories (NWT), in northern Canada:

- Sexual assault rate is 455% higher than the national average
- 50% need mental health services
- 40% of students graduate high school, compared to 74% nationally, on average
- 21% of the population relies, to varying degrees, on government income support for survival

The City of Yellowknife, NWT's capital, is located on the Shores of Great Slave Lake, about 512 km south of the Arctic Circle, and is home to almost half of the territory's population of 42,982. Over half of the population are aboriginal or Inuit.<sup>2</sup>

### Background

In 1989, during a week-long celebration of International Women's Day, 30 women began a discussion about space that was needed to provide support for women living in Yellowknife. Their vision was of a space where women could get together, network, and initiate projects of mutual interest. While the founding group had common goals, there was no agreement on key issues such as abortion, feminism, or the marginalization of aboriginal and Inuit women. The women continued to meet for discussion, and by January, 1990, the Yellowknife Women's Society was formally incorporated as a non-profit organization. YWS's operating principles are based on a consensus-style decision-making process that recognizes the value of diverse views. The CNF serves as an umbrella for many types of activities without trying to adopt a singular philosophy.

Through a private donation, the doors of the Yellowknife Women's Centre opened in a small house rented from a sympathetic group. For four years, the CNF was run by volunteer labor until more stable funding was finally secured in 1995. In 2001, the

"Without the outside support of national and international organizations that document the work of women at the grassroots level our voices could have been silenced."

— Arlene Hache, Executive Director<sup>3</sup>

group moved to a larger facility at its present location. When the Yellowknife Women's Centre moved, it was renamed the Centre for Northern Families (CNF), in recognition of its territorial impact and broad program range. CNF expanded to include an emergency shelter for women and licensed childcare. Activities are gender-specific but family focused, culturally relevant and person- rather than program-directed. Women who access services at CNF are encouraged to sit on the Board of Directors for YWS. They also fulfil operational roles in program and services delivery, and are prioritized in hiring.

In 2008, YWS purchased a 3-bedroom trailer through funding accessed under the federal Homelessness Initiative. The trailer provides transitional housing to women who are currently living at the emergency shelter, but who have the capacity to live more independently with a demonstrated ability to maintain positive lifestyle choices, such as those regarding addictions and involvement in school or work. Residency is available for up to one year.

The CNF is a space for nurturing, and is used by approximately 3,500 women and their families. The women create a collage of personalities that reveal strength, courage, compassion, and humour. They are very committed to their families and have a diverse yet keen sense of community, reflecting their wide-ranging cultural backgrounds.

The CNF not only provides a nurturing environment for access to essential social services, it also plays an advocacy role for women in the Northwest Territories. Over the past 19 years, YWS has been

involved in addressing social justice issues in the Canadian North, and is well known for its strong, public stance against oppression, racism, and systemic abuses. It has formed local, territorial, national, and international partnerships to highlight the particular needs of Northerners. Similarly, it has developed and implemented programs that support the health,

social, cultural, and economic autonomy of women in a way that is inclusive of their families.<sup>2</sup> Coalition and networking are important to this work, as indicated by the list of network affiliations. In addition, documenting the work of the CNF has strengthened its capacity to sustain cooperative local and territorial partnerships.

## Challenges & Plans for the Future

*"Marybeth was coming over to interview about homelessness and women in the North. They all know her, and everyone would get \$20 for sitting with Marybeth and she'll do the survey. One of the Inuit women said, 'Well you just tell Arlene that my story is worth a helluva lot more than twenty bucks!' And then the staff person was really offended, cause she thought that she should be thankful to get her smokes or whatever it was. So then the staff said, 'Arlene, do you know what that girl said? She said her story was worth a lot more than 20 bucks! She was mad.' I said, 'She is right!.' So you go back and tell that girl that that 20 bucks isn't for her story. The \$20 is for the hour. She gets \$20 an hour to sit with Marybeth for her story. So you tell her that you can't put a price on her story. But it's just how women function that we care about."*

—Arlene Hache, Executive Director<sup>3</sup>

The **YELLOWKNIFE WOMEN'S SOCIETY** is well known across the North for its work to reduce the marginalization of women, in particular, women from low-income and First Nation, Metis, and Inuit backgrounds through programs and services that promote social equality. The **CENTRE FOR NORTHERN FAMILIES** has been acknowledged by the government and the community as an essential service providing support to women and families that are not likely to access services elsewhere. Yet, ironically, just as society marginalizes the women, key

decision makers and service organizations marginalize the CNF. The center does not receive the same degree of funding as mainstream service organizations, which do not typically value the harm reduction model and view it as "too erratic" or "irresponsible." The CNF has even been charged by those who oppose its methods as enabling addicted women to continue their lifestyle.<sup>3</sup> But despite such opposition, the Executive Director was awarded the Order of Canada, the country's highest civilian honor, for her contribution to the community through the Centre for Northern Families. Just as importantly, aboriginal elders have commended the work of CNF in bringing issues of importance to them to the regional and national forefront. This speaks to the relevance of the CNF's goals, which include speaking "boldly about daily tragedies in a way that acknowledges our intrinsic value as people and inherent right to determine our own future."

The Centre for Northern Families is chronically underfunded and is looking for ways to continue supporting the women in the community who are in greatest need, while not compromising its work in other areas. The building and its shelter are of utmost importance; without this space, women needing shelter would die in the harsh conditions of the North. As one community woman said, "the Centre provides an invaluable resource to many women and families who have no place to turn." ■

### REFERENCES

<sup>1</sup> Huairou Commission Staff Report.

<sup>2</sup> 2001 Canada Census.

<sup>3</sup> Interview with Arlene Hache.

## Kenya

# GROOTS Mathare and the Mathare Mother's Development Centre

**GROOTS MATHARE** was formed in 1996, when 26 women's self-help groups in Mathare, the second largest slum in Nairobi, came together. It is the first and one of the most successful members of GROOTS Kenya, a network of over 2,000 women's self help and community development groups across the country. The group's first space opened in 1999 in central Mathare as a Mother Center, providing childcare and focusing on livelihood issues. The center was destroyed the same year during fires that spread across the settlement during a tribal conflict. It is now located on a main street adjacent to the settlement, and as the group starts new livelihood programs, it rents additional workshop space nearby. The Mathare Mother's Development Centre (MMDC) provides a base for home-based caregivers and the youth group to meet, and houses a day care center as well. GROOTS Mathare was recognized as a finalist in the Red Ribbon Award for its "community leadership and action on HIV/AIDS" in 2006.<sup>1</sup>

## MISSION

The mission of GROOTS Mathare, as an extension of the GROOTS Kenya network, is to facilitate grassroots women and their communities to effectively participate in development processes, and to "ensure that grassroots women are masters of their own destiny through direct participation in decision making processes."<sup>2</sup>

## PRIMARY ACTIVITIES AND USERS

The primary activities at the Mathare Centre include capacity-building, training and income generation activities, daycare for young children, home-based care to HIV/AIDS patients in the community, leadership training, and support for youth and youth organizing.

The MMDC provides a meeting and organizing space for women and youth from the community, and a home for the young children of working mothers. Different activity groups rent their own workshop spaces nearby but also use the center.

## NETWORKS

GROOTS Mathare, as a member of the national network, GROOTS Kenya, is a member of the Home-Based Care Alliance in Africa, and, internationally, is linked to GROOTS International and the Huairou Commission.

Sustaining community care and grassroots women's leadership in conflict and peace.



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## FUNDING

The current space for GROOTS Mathare is rented (at 7,000 Kenyan shillings per month in 2007) with support from GROOTS Kenya. The women also contribute through the income of their savings group and day care center to support the needs of the center.

The different activities and programs, including rent for additional workshop spaces, are funded mainly through private international donations or award money. The land for the future GROOTS Kenya center, where the group plans to relocate when it is built, was purchased through a private donation.

## TENURE, OWNERSHIP, AND MANAGEMENT

GROOTS Mathare currently rents the space for its activities. In 2003, GROOTS Kenya purchased a piece of land in Mathare to build a living and learning center for the national network and provide permanent space for GROOTS Mathare. However, lack of funds and the violence that swept through Kenya and Mathare in 2008 has stalled the project for now.

## DESCRIPTION OF SPACE

The GROOTS Mathare office and Mother's Development Centre is located on the second floor of a larger building. It has three rooms, a kitchenette, and a toilet. The largest room is the entrance hall, which is used for weekly meetings and serves as children's play area the rest of the time. One of the smaller rooms is used for day care for small children ages 2 to 6. The other room is used as office space with desks and seating as well as storage.

The group rents two rooms around the corner for the knitting and carpentry workshops used for training and income generation activities.



# The Process, Partnerships & Accomplishments

## Background

Mathare is the second largest slum in Nairobi. It is a densely populated settlement where people who have migrated to the city from different parts of the country live in poverty and poor environmental conditions without access to adequate social and physical infrastructure (clean water, sanitation, etc.). Most residents earn their living by running small roadside businesses in the area or by doing casual work. The ethnic diversity of the area, as in the rest of Kenya, has "produced a vibrant culture but is also a

source of conflict."<sup>3</sup> The ethnic violence that erupted in 1999, and again in 2008 following the presidential elections, led to massive destruction and loss of lives, and tore communities apart in "a country once regarded as one of Africa's most stable nations."<sup>4</sup>

Grassroots women's groups from GROOTS Kenya, a network of women's self-help groups from poor urban and rural areas across different regions and ethnicities, have been able to work across such tribal and cultural differences and hold their communities together. They admit that this is quite difficult

“I don’t need someone to speak on my behalf as a grassroots woman. I need to be facilitated to speak for myself.” — Ann Wanjiru, GROOTS Mathare<sup>7</sup>

but: “When we sit together as grassroots women we set aside our different tribes and communities. This is an unusual strength. In election periods, politicians want to come to see us because we bring all community members.”<sup>5</sup>

GROOTS Kenya was founded in 1995 by Esther Mwaura-Muiru, an activist who had met GROOTS International at the UN Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing earlier that year. Inspired by the GROOTS principle of “supporting grassroots women to speak for themselves (rather than be spoken for),” she initiated an organizing process.<sup>6</sup> The objective was to build solidarity among grassroots women’s groups in Kenya in order to upscale community-centered and women-led initiatives, and to help local leaders learn to represent themselves in development and decision-making processes that affect them—locally, nationally, and globally.

#### **GROOTS Kenya members now work in five interrelated areas:**

1. women’s leadership and governance,
2. community responses to HIV/AIDS,
3. community resources and livelihoods,
4. water, food security, energy, and environment, and
5. women and property.

Each year regional members come together in a retreat to share their experiences, ideas and plans for the following year. These meetings help the regional groups influence the strategic direction of the organi-

zation. In addition, through the regional focal point leaders, the organization provides support and guidance to regional sub-groups.<sup>8</sup> For instance, it was at the request of its members that GROOTS Kenya organized “training of trainers” workshops on home-based care in 12 regions of Kenya in 2002.

One of the greatest accomplishments of GROOTS Kenya was its large-scale mobilization in support of the Home-Based Care Alliance in 2006, which raised the visibility of home-based caregivers within Kenya, and eventually regionally and globally. GROOTS Kenya members have been invited to participate in national councils and consultations, and have begun to have access to decentralized funds through the Constituency AIDS Control Committees.<sup>9</sup> The care-giving work has also strengthened the social networks within local communities. Additionally, it has helped the members address women’s property ownership and inheritance rights issues by forming community watch groups to prevent the stripping of property belonging to widows and orphans in communities.

As a member of the GROOTS International and the Huairou Commission, grassroots leaders from GROOTS Kenya have participated in several international meetings and peer learning exchanges. Their participation in these events not only “changed the wider perceptions about grassroots women and their capacity to contribute to local, national and global debates” but also made the local leaders feel stronger as part of a larger movement.<sup>10</sup>

“Here in Kenya, we are 54,000 caregivers. I thought we were the only ones that are suffering with these problems. But (when) I sat down with my colleagues from all these countries, I saw we were facing all the same problems. Some of us have not gone to school, but we are specialists.”

— Beatrice Mwash, Mathare Mothers Development Centre<sup>11</sup>

### GROOTS Mathare and the Mathare Mother's Development Centre

Formed in 1996, GROOTS Mathare brought 250 women from 26 previously existing self-help groups together. The groups were involved in basket weaving, knitting and crochet, table cloth making, bead work and jewelry making, etc., and had weekly merry-go-round meetings.

Mathare Mother's Development Centre opened in 1999 in the interior of the slum, and GROOTS Kenya got money from private donors to pay the full year's rent. The first activity at the center was the day care program. The idea came from one of their members, Rose Omia, one of the center's coordinators, who had attended a peer learning exchange and learned about the Mother Centers in Germany. The group decided that it was that important to provide a safe place and childcare to allow mothers to work. That year, after a major accident at a workplace in downtown Nairobi where many were hurt, women were no longer allowed to take their children to work. But it was too dangerous for children to be left home alone in the settlement. At first, the program started with women taking turns caring for children on a voluntary basis. As the number of children grew, they began charging 10 Kenyan shillings per day (about 14 US cents), with the mothers providing food. Later, to ensure consistency and quality of care, the group decided to have two women receive an allowance and raised the fee to 20 Kenyan shillings per day (27 US cents) to accommodate this program. Since not everyone can afford even this small amount, the MMDC sometimes determines the fee on a case-by-case basis.

It had taken a year to get the building that the group moved into in 1999, but, tragically, the tribal clashes and fires that spread throughout the settlement that same year destroyed the original location. The group moved to another room on the edge of the settlement. After five years at this second location, in 2006, the group again relocated to its current space nearby, a larger space on the main street. As the group started new programs and activities, they rented additional workshop spaces.

*"We found that many women were missing our meetings... She was missing because she was looking after*

*the sick ones or the husband or the child or a neighbor who was ailing at home... "*

—Agatha Ihachi, a GROOTS Mathare member.<sup>12</sup>

When GROOTS Mathare members realized that women were missing meetings because of illness or to care for relatives, they decided to work on this issue. They found out that the public hospitals were not a solution; they had to learn how to give care without fear of getting infected. Beginning in 2000, the first group of six women were trained as trainers on HIV/AIDS counselling and care and started to work. In 2002, a grant through GROOTS Kenya, allowed them to start the full Home-Based Care program. Over 50 people were trained in home-based care through the GROOTS Kenya trainers-of-trainers (TOT) program. However, since it was voluntary work, only 28 members were able to continue this highly demanding volunteer work.

*"Jane Wanjiku, from the Mathare Mothers Development Centre, typically spends 21 hours a week caring for her friends. She contributes money for transportation to visit people outside of her direct neighborhood, to accompany people to the hospital, and to speak with the teachers of orphans in her care. She buys water to bathe people and wash their laundry, and pays for them to use the toilet, as Mathare is a slum area with no free toilets. She also brings them food and medicine. She said that sometimes she spends entire days advocating with government officials to obtain identity cards for orphans."*<sup>13</sup>

The group started keeping records of bed ridden patients, their food and medical needs and the number of children in the family. This helped them to identify orphans, as well as women who needed support. Record keeping was also important to plan the work and patients' needs as people took turns in the care work, and manage their budget. As the volunteers were involved in transporting patients to hospitals and delivering medicines from clinics and food from feeding programs, staff at local hospitals started referring patients to members of GROOTS Mathare.

Other activities emerged as a result of Home-Based Care Program. A 23-member microlending

project was started in 2002, but the Home-Based Care volunteers also decided to have their own savings group to raise money to support the patients and pay for their transportation to the hospital. At the group's weekly meetings, each contributes 20 shillings to the 'merry-go-round', 5 shillings of which goes to the patients.

The knitting program emerged as one of the home-based caregivers, Lucy Marete, started teaching the orphans and the children of the sick to knit using her own machine. She herself was disturbed as a parent, when she saw young girls prostituting themselves in order to feed their siblings.

In 2003, with support from GROOTS Kenya, the group was able to rent a room for this training program. At first, they had only two old machines, and it took a year to train eight girls. As they got a few new machines donated by visitors, as well as a donation from the World Council of Churches, they could purchase materials, pay the rent and train larger groups in half the time. Over the four years, out of 48 girls, 38 completed the training, given their difficult circumstances, and 15 managed to secure jobs. In 2008, despite enrolment of 19 new girls, the program had to be suspended temporarily since they could not pay the rent.

GROOTS Mathare also started partnering with youth groups, who work on education, stigma-reduction and raising awareness.<sup>14</sup> YSAFE (Youths in Slums Aiming for Excellence) started in 2002 by a young member of GROOTS Mathare, Gordon Owino. As he explains: "In 2002 I got an opportunity to be in the Training of Trainers (TOT) for Home-Based Caregivers. After that when we started the care-giving, we saw that there was a need. We discussed among ourselves that there was a need not only to care for those who are infected but we also needed to start a prevention program. We needed to bring in the youth and create a youth initiative. YSAFE puts on plays and skits and sings songs to promote education on health, HIV/AIDS, the environment and sanitation. We've involved some other groups in clean up service and educated people on sanitation..."

The twenty-five members of YSAFE travel to schools and churches and work with other youth groups within and outside of Mathare. GROOTS

Mathare has rented a carpentry workshop for the youth to generate income, and another room where they do laundry work. Some also run petty errands for the slum landlords to generate income for the group.<sup>15</sup>

In 2004, with support from a Canadian philanthropist, GROOTS Mathare started sponsoring 20 orphans to continue their education. Some of the children from this first group have completed secondary school and received additional support to learn trades like carpentry and mechanics, while others are still in school. Six women set up the Sponsorship Committee to follow up on the children, making sure they attend school and participated in the training programs. In February 2006, GROOTS Mathare started another group to support AIDS orphans, some living in child-headed households. The Orphans and Vulnerable Children Committee found resources to meet the basic need of children. They identified 25 orphans and vulnerable children in the area to receive support from the Church World Service to receive school supplies, uniforms, and shoes, as well as presents during Christmas time. They got food and medical support from the aid organization German Doctors, and found free housing for the children at a housing project just outside of Mathare. At the same time, they organized workshops to help the children think about their future and support them as they fulfill their dreams. One project was called "Memory Book Writing," where the children, some of whom did not know their parents well, were asked to write their personal history as much as they could remember. Now they know where their family comes from. They also take children on field trips to see other parts of the city outside the slum.

GROOTS Mathare members have managed to achieve a lot with very limited resources. The group has gained recognition in the community, as well as government agencies and health institutions, for their advocacy efforts and involvement in different issues that affect the area. They play a key role in the national network as well as global peer exchanges, and have gained international recognition for their leadership and action on community health and welfare.

## Challenges & Plans for the Future

The main challenge facing **GROOTS MATHARE** and the **MOTHER'S DEVELOPMENT CENTRE** is the lack of a steady source of funding and the high cost of rent in Mathare. The rent for the center is 7,000 shillings per month (or US \$105) and the two workshop spaces cost an additional 13,500 Kenyan shillings (US \$202). Another issue is that their current space is too small to accommodate all the activities of GROOTS Mathare, from childcare to trainings, workshops for livelihood activities and youth programs. It is difficult to operate out of three separate places. Moreover, the women have many other ideas for new program development. Lucy hopes they can open a nursery school in addition to their child care, and perhaps even a "pre-unit and primary school." Others, like Jane, hope the new center would allow them to offer residential space for the orphans and women.

GROOTS Kenya has been planning to build a center that would serve the network as well as GROOTS Mathare since 1999. They started negotiations with the government for allocation of land for the center, but realizing the following year that this could mean the loss of their auton-

omy from party politics, they stopped the process. A new opportunity opened up when a photographer, who wanted to write a book on "women who changed their lives," visited GROOTS Mathare. Moved by what she saw, she raised an initial \$6,000, and then donated another \$20,000 specifically for GROOTS Kenya to buy land for a new center. In 2004, the center finally found and purchased a large enough plot in Mathare. A member of the Architectural Society of Kenya prepared the design for the Living Learning Centre. It would have a big hall for income generating activities, a literacy center for women, two guest rooms for visitors or battered women to stay, a youth and a childcare center, and a shop to sell the products of women. But, as previously noted, a lack of funds for the construction and the ethnic violence in 2008, stalled the project.

The group is looking forward to the prospect of moving in to the new center of GROOTS Kenya when it is built. This will allow them to use their own funds from income generation activities and the merry-go-round savings groups to purchase materials, meet members' needs and sustain and develop other activities. ■

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## United States

# Living Learning Centers

The National Congress of Neighborhood Women, GROOTS International, and the Huairou Commission

**LIVING LEARNING CENTERS (LLC)** are women-developed and managed physical spaces in which to conduct women-centered, inter-generational, and multi-cultural community activities. LLCs combine functional spaces, including a community resource center, shared meeting rooms, workshops, and teaching areas, learning spaces, such as a library, archive, information services, and organization offices, with an intergenerational residential component providing temporary lodging for visitors and permanent housing for long-term women activists and movement leaders.

"The space blurs the division between working and living, allowing for personal privacy, peer support, permanent residency, visitors and the community together under the same roof. Embedded within the LLC concept is the belief that there is life beyond retirement, in the value of multiplying partnership and interface between grassroots groups, in the opportunity to use the neighborhood as a campus and in the possibility of creating wealth through communal sharing. It is a permanent home for mentoring, network building and capacity-sharing projects across the world."<sup>2</sup>

The LLC provides institutional support for neighborhood women who have made a lifetime commitment to the community building to share experiences among those with differing cultural, economic, race and gender backgrounds. They are designed to illustrate how the community can be a learning campus, how wealth can be created through pooling resources, and how intergenerational mentoring and support can sustain leadership and organizing for the long-term.

Similar centers are established or currently being developed in the Appalachian and Mid-Western regions of the United States, Africa, and Asia.

"...One of Caroline's [Caroline Pezzulo, founder of GROOTS International] dreams was to establish living and learning centers where people of all ages and ethnicities would be able to come together to foster a community of common interests and concerns. Today vibrant centers in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, St. Louis, Missouri and Appalachia—Clearfork, Tennessee—form part of the legacy of Caroline Pezzullo's life. They, like her, nurture the best of the human spirit in service to social justice and recognition of the wisdom, gifts and skills of grassroots women."<sup>3</sup>

"...We continue the path of urban and rural women trying to start living-learning centers in their community and interfacing the wisdom of our age with the energy of our youth and the determination of those in-between."

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## United States

National Congress of Neighborhood Women

# Neighborhood Women House Living Learning Center

The **NEIGHBORHOOD WOMEN HOUSE LIVING LEARNING CENTER** at 249 Manhattan Avenue in Brooklyn, New York was founded by the National Congress of Neighborhood Women (NCNW), whose mission is to strengthen the leadership capacities of grassroots women developing their low-income urban and rural communities. Neighborhood House is an intergenerational and shared Living Learning Center (LLC) hosting the offices of local and global women's community development organizations. The NCNW and Neighborhood Women Williamsburg/Greenpoint are the national and local groups involved with this Center, with support from GROOTS International and the Huairou Commission (HC) at the international level. The LLC is a safe space and power base for women of all ages and from diverse racial and ethnic, class and religious backgrounds, to visit and exchange experiences and skills. It is open to the neighborhood women for support groups, resource information, and workshops.

### MISSION

The mission of the Center is continue the legacy of women's activism in the community by creating an intergenerational public living, learning, and working space that celebrates the history of grassroots women who have taken leadership in the historically poor and working class community of Williamsburg and Greenpoint. It enables women organizers from these neighborhoods to mentor and remain in the community after retirement. The Center also supports the mission of the local, national, and global grassroots women's groups by providing a local home for these organizations.

### PRIMARY ACTIVITIES AND USERS

The Center is used by grassroots and professional women who are members or guests of the networks. It provides a base for the accommodation of women from across the global south when they are in New York City to represent their development priorities at the United Nations. It also provides housing for women community leaders of all ages.

As the Secretariat of four organizations—local, national, and two international networks—it supports their activities, including:

- Local and global advocacy
- Leadership support and training

Nurturing grassroots  
women's leadership,  
local to global...



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## NETWORKS

Neighborhood Women House is supported by the NCNW network of Living Learning Centers, and by GROOTS International.

## FUNDING

The women involved with the Center purchased the building through program monies and fundraising in 1982. Subsequent renovation, in 2003, was financed by private grants. The Center meets operational costs through project funding, rental income from four residential units within the building, and through funds from private donations.

## TENURE, OWNERSHIP, AND MANAGEMENT

The Center is owned by the National Congress of Neighborhood Women and co-managed by the two global networks (HC and GROOTS International) whose New York offices are located in the Center.

## DESCRIPTION OF THE SPACE

The building is a three-story, 4,400-square foot (410 square meters), brick rowhouse on a 1,900-square foot (176 square meters) lot, originally constructed in the late 1800s as a courthouse and judge's residence, later becoming a light manufacturing sweat shop for teddy bears and garments for Saks Fifth Ave. Remnants of the old uses remained when NCNW acquired the building, which has always had a residential component. The ground floor has two large workshop/office spaces for daily office work and intern training, a kitchen, washrooms and shower, with storage and mechanical systems in the basement. On the second floor, the former classroom and office space was converted into a spacious and well-lit community living room used for meetings and workshops. Part of this area can be used for temporary accommodation as well. This floor has a two-bedroom apartment, the kitchen and living room of which can be made available for hosting special events and additional guests. The third floor has two additional small apartments and a studio with roof access. The building is located on a corner lot in the heart of the neighborhood, in close proximity to a diverse retail area. Its small outdoor space includes the Geraldine Miller Center for Dialogue, named in honor of the activist leader and founder of the Household Technicians Union.



## The Process, Partnerships & Accomplishments

### From the Local Neighborhood to a National Organization

Williamsburg and Greenpoint, now gentrified neighborhoods in Brooklyn, New York, were in 1969 predominantly working-class and mixed ethnic (Italian, Polish, Irish, Hispanic, and African American) communities. Jan Peterson, the founder of Neighborhood Women, was inspired by the work of the civil rights, anti-poverty, and feminists movements, and she understood that inter-racial, multi-ethnic community women's organizations would be central to the advancement of poor and working-class neighborhoods. Peterson started working with neighborhood women in the Conselyea Street Block Association, and initiated several community facilities, such as a seniors' center, daycare centers, and parks to claim space for women. The neighborhood women learned from the fight for these spaces: "Jan and the women felt they had learned an important lesson: groups that want to empower themselves must claim physical space to house the structures they are trying to create. The theme of claiming space would continue to be elaborated by the women of the years to come. Clearly claiming space is a primary step in the process."<sup>4</sup>

By 1973, it was clear that sharing practices from other women's organizations at the national level was important. At a meeting sponsored by the National Center for Urban Ethnic Affairs, Jan Peterson, with other grassroots leaders and professional women, planned a national conference of working-class women in Washington D.C. It was at their second conference in 1975, that "the first national federation of blue collar, neighborhood women," the National Congress of Neighborhood Women, was founded. This new group established its office in Williamsburg-Greenpoint. NCNW's vision was to develop a national network of grassroots women to share resources, experiences, and knowledge.<sup>5</sup>

The Williamsburg-Greenpoint office became the headquarters for NCNW as well as for the local activities which would serve as a model for empowerment

of poor and working-class women to become community leaders, defining, and solving problems facing their communities.

*"I have been part of the community at 249 Manhattan for 27 years. I got involved year one, in the basement they had a women gathering. I left my husband because of domestic violence. I was a single mother with 4 kids. I had no job and I was in a very bad depression. I first got counselling support from the other women who had gone through what I had been going through in life. Then I got my GED program, I got my college degree here from NW and I have been working here for a very long time. It feels so comfortable here and I feel welcome and it's a family environment we have. We like the space here."*

—Juanita Rodriguez, NW Fiscal and Building Manager

### Education and Knowledge Sharing

"As the first in my family to attend college, I had to deal with the contradiction of 'moving up and out,' having to leave and yet wanting to preserve and stay 'in community.' I realized the important connection between education, women's leadership and community."

In 1975, NCNW developed several educational programs in the community. These included a community-based higher education college program for mature women who were active in the community to develop leadership skills while earning credit for their community work, and improving eligibility for employment. The college program provided a way for women to learn, work, and remain in the community. Project Open Doors, added work apprenticeship with other neighborhood women's and community organizations. By the 1980s, NCNW educational programming added pre-college adult education courses in literacy, math, English as a second language, and preparation for the high school equivalency degree. In 1986, NCNW opened the You Can Stand on Your Own Two Feet Community School, an alternative education, pre-employment and leadership training program for youth and single mothers. These educa-

tional programs were based on preserving family and community cohesiveness.

The key component to education was leadership support: “The education is that we had to change the nature of how women learned and make it communal and familial. We set up a community-based college because otherwise our education systems were draining all the best leaders away from the community, making them not appreciate their community and families. Then we created leadership support and women had to learn how to work with each other and support each other and not be competing with each other. They also had to learn how to do that.

We established methods, tools and basic agreements on how women could work effectively to build and operate organizations. We saw that women leaders usually stayed in one place and they couldn’t delegate. They were leaders doing all the work and not learning really how to build real organizations, and learning to move within their communities.”

The leadership training and support program, and the leadership support process (LSP) began as a basic element of the college program, were also offered at regional and national conferences and with affiliated organizations and at NCNW’s Annual Summer Institutes of Women and Community Development. Neighborhood women developed an awareness of how oppression based on class, ethnicity, race or gender might impede their sense of empowerment as leaders. LSP continues today with the global networks of grassroots women leaders.

By 2000, knowledge sharing expanded to global peer learning through regional and international events such as the Grassroots Women’s Academies.<sup>6</sup> The Grassroots Women’s International Academy (GWIA) was designed and initiated by members of the Mother Centers International Network for Empowerment (MINE) and conducted in cooperation with Groots International and the Huairou Commission. Grassroots women leaders present their best practices and produce vision, policy, and funding recommendations for presentation at home, for various agencies, government bodies and at global United Nations conferences. A large body of knowledge exists from these knowledge-sharing activities.

### Networking, Alliance-Building and Cooperation

From the first neighborhood advocacy initiative for good community development, NCNW understood the power of cooperation among women. In 1985, NCNW participated in the UN Third World Conference on Women in Nairobi. Noticing the lack of grassroots women at the conference, NCNW became a founding member and North American representative of GROOTS (Grassroots Organizations Operating Together in Sisterhood), an international network for grassroots women, and received official United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) consultative status.

GROOTS supported a large delegation of grassroots women from around the world to attend the UN’s Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995. As part of the Women Homes and Community Supercoalition, GROOTS and NCNW helped claim space at the conference with the Grassroots Women’s Tent where grassroots women from around the world gathered to share learning, form alliances and plan a future together. The Supercoalition, became the Huairou Commission with GROOTS as a founding member. The Huairou Commission is a partnership network of grassroots and professional women’s networks, and is an official partner representing women to UN-Habitat. Both GROOTS and the Huairou Commission continue to bring grassroots women leaders and their expertise to the global stage.

### Claiming Space

About space and empowerment, founder Peterson has said, “Even now somebody brand new will walk in and you can see that they can feel that the women really feel that it is their space just by how we walk sit, what we do, where we put everything—very empowering.”

While empowerment of women through education and working together was important, the women knew that the key to sustainability of the organization and their work is in the control of space. To this end, in 1981, after losing the fight against closure of the local hospital, Neighborhood Women developed housing in three of the hospital buildings through advocacy and negotiation. Ten years later, after being designed through a community involvement process, Neighborhood Women Renaissance Hous-

ing opened, bringing 33 affordable housing units to the community.

But at the same time, while the community advocacy was successful, the fragility of claiming space that was not owned became apparent when Neighborhood Women was evicted by an ally organization in the fight to save the hospital. They had to move. Disappointment, however, brought the opportunity to buy a partially empty, light industrial building in a good location in the Williamsburg neighborhood. In 1981, NCNW purchased the building at 249 Manhattan Ave. By 1995, the building was debt free and fully owned and controlled by the women.

"Owning that building—women owned the space—transformed our work from the very beginning. We realized that we could turn it into a space

that could be sustainable, just paying our little \$231 mortgage which we always could manage. We could cover the cost of the building through rentals from people who are charged a lower rental than they would normally have to pay. We didn't have to use our grant money to pay for the telephone, gas, electricity, repairs. That was a major step forward. Having this one asset was the most important."

By 2000, the concept of the Living Learning Center had evolved, and in 2003, 75 percent of the building had been renovated. The intergenerational space has hosted women and their families from around the world as well as housed aging leaders and parents, and young interns and staff at below market rents. Other NCNW members have created LLCs in Saint Louis and Clearfork, Tennessee.

## Challenges & Plans for the Future

*"...Our center is a learning lab on our legacy as a social movement for promoting grassroots women's leadership in poor and working class communities. We physically illustrate how our space supports organizations to grow, transform & also die out as well as the circumstances under which we can and cannot support a safe and decent quality of life for our grassroots leaders and professional partners as they (we) age, retire and require increasing levels of support. We probably have a lot to learn from the nuns..."*

—Sandy Schilen, GROOTS Global Chair

The **LIVING LEARNING CENTER** grew from the need of social activist women leaders who have worked all their lives for the community without pensions and with limited or no extended family support. NCNW has created a model of family and

living/working space that provides security and sustainability within an active community and working environment. Most important is ownership and control of the space. Without this basic organizational need, the work and leadership would not have flourished.

For the last 10 years, NCNW has been looking for other land in the neighborhood to develop a LLC with a larger residential component. After the partial renovation of 249 Manhattan Ave and the arrival of gentrification in the neighborhood that is greatly increasing the value of land, the women are also considering an expansion of the existing building by adding 2 floors. With freehold title and no mortgage, the building could be leveraged for new premises or for a major expansion. The challenge now is to ensure the smooth transfer of leadership. ■

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## Conclusion

The case studies in this booklet highlight the fact that space is an important factor in grassroots women's groups' organizing process. Some of the groups use space as a starting point to bring grassroots women together to organize around their basic needs and build their leadership capacity, as in the case of Mothers Centers in Germany and the Czech Republic and Women and Children Centers in Turkey. For others, as in the case of Mahiti Kendras in India, building a public community center marks a phase in the groups' organizing process. Space is a way for the groups to consolidate their accomplishments and formalize their leadership in order to move their activities to the next level. Similarly, the Pragati Mahila Utthan Savings and Credit Cooperative in Nepal, the Union de Cooperativas de Mujeres Las Brumas in Nicaragua, the Mathare Women's Development Centre in Kenya and the Czech Mother Centers Network have moved to a place of their own after their member groups were already organized. The organization had reached a critical mass and needed the space to formalize and upscale its work, as well as to conduct its day to day operations.

In other cases, claiming space is a matter of taking advantage of the opportunities that open up after natural or man-made disasters for grassroots women's participation and contributions. As international aid organizations build places to offer post-disaster community services, grassroots organizations may succeed in taking over the spaces that they are invited to use and sustaining them as their own, as in the case of the Polyclinic and Village of Hope in post-genocide Rwanda and the Kanta Ran Arunalu Kendraya Women's Resource Center in post-tsunami Sri Lanka. In Canada, on the other hand, with its well-established social service institutions, claiming space has meant carving out a niche in the existing social services system. The Aboriginal Mother Centre and the Centre for Northern Families in Yellowknife were thus able to create a home base for the most marginalized social and ethnic groups in a wealthy society.

The cases show that space does not only refer to an empty physical shelter. It is the activities, practices, and relationships that take place and that are formed inside that give these spaces their meaning. The women's spaces documented here address a wide range of community needs with very little overhead costs. First, they serve as community information centers, where women can get critical information on government programs or community events, and gain new knowledge and skills through the trainings and capacity building programs offered. Second, they serve as anchoring places for women who have lost their social networks as a result of displacement from their homes and communities due to migration, natural disasters, civil strife, or social stigmatization. As the cases from Kenya, Rwanda, Canada, and Turkey show, these spaces provide a nurturing environment for the women to come out of their trauma or isolation. Third, the centers provide flexible and affordable, and sometimes volunteer-supported, community based services that arise from a closer understanding of their own community's needs. For instance, in Rwanda and Kenya, the home-based care workers meet the needs of the sick with respect for their dignity, thus providing a more effective response than the conventional social services can. Childcare services offered through the Women and Children Centers and Mother Centers in general accommodate the needs of mothers, while providing quality early childhood education. Fourth, as a welcoming daily drop-in place for women from different ethnic or cultural backgrounds, and/or through the caregiving services provided through the center, these spaces help strengthen social ties in communities, build peace, and strengthen local democracy. Fifth, they serve as incubators to nurture small businesses and income generation activities of women. Sixth, the centers can also serve as a model in innovative construction techniques to the rest of the community. For instance, during the post-disaster construction program, Mahiti Kendras were used as

a model on how to adapt traditional construction techniques to build disaster-resistant structures. In Sri Lanka, the new center was built to act as a potential disaster shelter. Finally, the centers, through their physical presence in the community, provide a group identity and a base to the grassroots women's groups. This public presence and identity gives the women power and confidence when negotiating with the authorities for participation in local planning and governance decisions.

Formal legal ownership and security of tenure of these community spaces is a key condition for the sustainability of these centers. Rent is a big burden and leaves the groups vulnerable to the fluctuations in the real estate market. Interestingly, the case studies reveal that groups would like to own their space not only because of the security of tenure that formal legal ownership would provide but also because the space is an asset that they can rely on to generate income for their operations, such as in Jamaica and the United States. Security of tenure, as some of the cases, such as those from India, Germany, Turkey, and Rwanda show, also depends to a large extent on support from the community and their partners, and especially on the group's relations with the local government that allocated the space to them in the first place. All of these groups have been able to obtain, often with support from a well-established NGO partner, some form of documentation to legitimate their right to use the space if challenged. As a result, they are even more confident about their ability to negotiate with the authorities.

A key lesson from the case studies, then, is that the success and sustainability of the space depends above all on the dedication and willingness of the grassroots women's leaders to struggle to sustain their space in the long run. This comes from a strong sense of ownership that derives from the fact that they are run and managed by grassroots women. The centers are spaces of their own, where the grassroots women feel welcome, get support, develop themselves and feel empowered through their new group identity. The feeling of being in charge and having control over the activities that take place at the center and the solidarity that develops among

the members as a result of their collective work to improve their community lead to a sense of ownership among the women. It is this strong sense of ownership that motivates the women and releases their creative potential to maintain their community centers against all odds.

Almost all the groups envision expanding their space as their activities proliferate. Las Brumas in Nicaragua has already added an annex to accommodate larger group meetings and members who come from rural areas to stay overnight. Mother Center Stuttgart, too, has already moved and established its presence in a large modern building offering inter-generational programs. GROOTS Kenya has purchased a piece of land in Mathare and is looking for funding to build a national living and learning center that will also house GROOTS Mathare. The Pragati Mahila Utthan Savings & Credit Cooperative in Nepal is hoping to get place of its own with a larger meeting space for its members.

Most of the groups are also looking into replicating their centers in other communities. DAMPA has been successful in quickly disseminating the community pharmacy outlets in different urban poor neighborhoods in a very short time. The Mother Centers, Women and Children Centers in Turkey, and the Mahiti Kendras in India, also based on a simple model of community women's leadership, have been successfully replicated through a process of peer exchange and adaptation to local conditions. Similarly the Rwanda Women's Network has already created two more Polyclinic of Hope centers outside of Kigali.

The Indian, Nicaraguan, Czech and Sri Lankan cases show that the process of creating and running these community centers is a valuable learning experience for grassroots women. During the design and program development phase, women have a chance to reflect on their current needs and priorities as well as future plans for programs. The construction phase requires learning to mobilize local resources and networks, managing the budget and financial matters, and supervising the workers. The permit process requires learning about regulations, getting community support, dealing with government agencies, and negotiating with the local government for allocation

of space and/or to get the necessary paperwork done. All of these skills are needed later to operate and sustain the centers.

## CHALLENGES

However, there are several obstacles to the sustainability of these spaces. The first two major obstacles, as indicated by most of the groups, is the issue of secure tenure and stable funding for their operations. Most of the groups—with the exception of the NCNW, Nicaragua and Jamaica—do not have formal ownership of their centers. Some groups, as in Kenya and Nepal, simply rent their space through the market. Others have raised the resources to construct their own building but the land is leased or allocated to them by the local government with or without any legal documentation (as in India and Rwanda). In Turkey, the groups have a document signed by the authorities that explains the arrangement (Turkey). Mother Center Stuttgart has been successful in signing a contract to guarantee its long-term tenure.

Lack of full and formal ownership of the property puts the women's access to space under constant threat, either through a change in administration or land value increases as a result of rapid urban development. Moreover, ownership of the building and the land is critical since it provides a potential source of income to cover the overhead costs for building maintenance as in the case of the Neighborhood Women House Living Learning Center in the United States, or to fund some of their operations, as in the case of the CRDC and the Women's Construction Collective in Jamaica. Owning and managing a communal public space can be a *de facto* model for grassroots women's access to property and housing.

Another potential threat is the loss of the group's autonomy and control over the space. This might be as a result of incorporation of the center into the body of a social service agency. While there are successful partnership examples, and while such institutional partnerships may mean a steady source of funding for the group's operations, it has the potential to destroy the culture and spirit of these grassroots women's spaces. Mother Center Stuttgart, for example, had to work hard to establish its values and

presence in the new intergenerational social services center that it had played a key role in creating. There are examples when such arrangements can result in the marginalization, and eventually, expulsion of grassroots women from their space by social service professionals.

## RECOMMENDATIONS:

The groups and the centers need formal recognition of their work, security of tenure, and a steady source of funding to support their activities. It is crucial that local governments recognize and provide full support to and partner with the grassroots women's organizations in their efforts to create and sustain their own community spaces. There is good value for the investment and much is achieved for the community through these spaces.

Expanding partnerships and alliances is critical in accessing resources and gaining formal recognition. Local, regional, and international networking and peer exchanges are important for learning and sharing strategies and tools and supporting each other's efforts both personally and politically. Practical lessons learned on how to access, manage, and run spaces as a way to consolidate their accomplishments and as a communal asset must be shared. The Huairou Commission and GROOTS International's Grassroots Women's Academies are excellent opportunities, not only to increase the visibility of local groups' efforts to access and maintain access to space, but also to develop collective strategies for grassroots women to formalize their leadership and establish a place of their own.

Funding agencies must include sufficient resources to adequately meet the space requirements of programs they support, rather than simply operational and staffing needs.

The Huairou Commission is considering setting up a global revolving fund to support the creation or expansion of grassroots women's community centers. The fund would be controlled by a board of representatives from grassroots women's organizations. Contributing to such a fund would be a most effective strategy to ensure that the resources are used to best meet the needs of the local groups. ■

## Forging strategic partnerships to advance the capacity of grassroots women worldwide to strengthen and create sustainable communities.

The **HUAIROU COMMISSION**, established in 1995 at the 4th World Conference on Women in Beijing, is a global coalition of networks, institutions and individual professionals that links grassroots women's community development organizations to partners for access to resources, information sharing and political spaces. The Huairou Commission fosters grassroots women's groups' participation in decision-making processes focusing on promoting urban and rural livability and sustainable development, local to global, and promotes the awareness of a pro-poor, women-centered development agenda among key bilateral and multi-lateral institutions.

Driven by grassroots women's organizations from around the world, this unique network partners with individuals and organizations who support the belief that it is in the best interests of local and international communities for grassroots women to be full partners in sustainable development. The Huairou Commission is a collaboration among development professionals and locally focused women's networks that aims to highlight and upscale the effective local development approaches of grassroots women's groups and to establish development policies and programs that foster their replication. Organizing their work by thematic areas, Huairou Commission members focus on network building, knowledge sharing, and advocacy activities associated with three crosscutting themes:

- Sustaining grassroots women's leadership in redeveloping families, homes, communities, and economies in crisis situations (disaster, post-conflict, and HIV/AIDS);
- Local governance and asset-securing approaches that anchor grassroots women's participation; and
- Collaborative partnerships that strengthen and upscale grassroots local knowledge and advance alternative development policies.

Network members and organizations organize around securing basic needs and human settlement issues committed themselves to campaign initiatives organized around four themes: Governance, Community Resilience, AIDS, Land & Housing.

These themes, identified bottom-up from the work of grassroots women's organizations, concretize and advance the contributions poor women are making to reduce poverty, meet basic needs, re-establish collective self-help approaches, and change local decision making to include them. The Huairou Commission's core goal is to win the development community's recognition that grassroots women's groups' participation in local planning, implementation, and evaluation is a prerequisite for effective poverty reduction and decentralization.

### **The Huairou Commission seeks partners to join with it and its member organizations to:**

- Identify, pilot, replicate, and upscale effective strategies by low income women's groups to meet basic needs, respond to conflict and emergency situations, and cooperate with local authorities to promote women's involvement in solving local problems and engendering formal decision making.
- Document and disseminate these strategies as well as the Commission's set of capacity building methodologies to promote recognition among the general public, policy makers, and development institutions of why and how women must be supported to act as development agents in poor communities.
- Share and analyze our lessons learned, areas of influence, and partners, in order to coordinate and collaborate in thematic and cross cutting advocacy at the regional and global levels.

Today GROOTS is a flexible network of women-led grassroots organizations and partner NGOs who cooperate across more than twenty seven countries

**GRASSROOTS ORGANIZATIONS  
OPERATING TOGETHER IN SISTERHOOD  
(GROOTS INTERNATIONAL)**

emerged in Kenya in 1985 when six proactive women organizers envisioned a global network where grassroots women's organizations, working to develop their communities and reduce women's poverty, could form relationships and partnerships across national and regional boundaries and share information, experiences, skills, and resources and forge a global social change agenda reflective of common priorities and diverse local realities. That dream became GROOTS. Today GROOTS is a flexible network of women-led grassroots organizations and partner NGOs who cooperate across more than twenty seven countries in Africa, Asia, Latin America, the Caribbean, the South Pacific, Europe (East and West), and North America who work to develop poor rural and urban communities and empower women to take the lead in decision making processes affecting their lives (local to global). Linked by shared principles and values, and committed to linking women leaders in poor communities worldwide, GROOTS' members focus on advancing four goals:

1. To strengthen women's participation in the development of communities and the approaches to problem solving.
2. To help urban and rural grassroots women's groups identify and share their successful development approaches and methods globally.
3. To focus international attention on grassroots women's needs and capabilities.
4. To increase the opportunities for local women's groups and leaders to network directly across national boundaries.

**These goals support GROOTS in building  
a movement of grassroots women's  
organizations that can:**

- Articulate a pro-poor, women-centered vision of sustainable community development featuring integrated, collective, inter-generational/family supportive approaches;
- Collect and transfer the knowledge and skills grassroots women have created from strategically solving community problems and improving their living and working conditions across groups and countries, internationally challenge the social exclusion grassroots women face when development and government officials (and other elites) speak and take decisions on their behalf; and
- Globally redirect development programs and monies to local, grassroots women... run community based organizations and reduce donor and government reliance on outside professionals and wealthy non-governmental organizations (who take knowledge and money out of the local economy and women's hands). GROOTS implements a global work plan featuring five thematic programs (reflective of members' community development and advocacy priorities). The programs commonly support peer learning and training opportunities, expand and strengthen grassroots women's organizing and negotiating efforts, focus on shifting policy priorities and investments, and engage institutions and partners of influence to support grassroots women's agendas for short- and long-term change.

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## Appendix A: Our Practices Exhibition

UN HABITAT Conference, Istanbul 1996

The Huairou Commission (HC) was established during the United Nations (UN) Fourth World Conference on Women in 1995 in Beijing after ten days of discussion and strategizing in the Grassroots Tent. HC was formally launched the following year, at the end of the UN Second World Conference on Human Settlements (Habitat II). In order to have a strong voice at the Habitat II Conference, the women's networks that formed the Huairou Commission had joined together under the name Women Homes and Community Super Coalition. The networks in the coalition included GROOTS International, HIC Women and Shelter Network, WEDO, and the International Council on Women with UNCHS as their partner.

The Super Coalition used several strategies during the Habitat II Conference to claim space and increase the visibility of women's groups. In addition to lobbying government representatives to support and include women's concerns and priorities in the final Habitat Agenda, they also made their presence felt at the parallel NGO Forum. Members of the Super Coalition held the daily Women's Caucus, and organized and participated in numerous workshops and panels. They networked at the Women's Tent that the Super Coalition had set up in the garden of the NGO building, and two members of GROOTS International organized a temporary childcare center for conference participants. The Super Coalition also sponsored the "Our Practices" exhibition displayed at the NGO Forum Building.

The "Our Practices" exhibition featured 31 panels, including a vision statement and 36 projects by 28 grassroots organizations representing 15 countries from different regions of the world. The exhibition was integrated into the Coalition's workshops and expanded with contributions from the participating groups. The German Mother Centers set up a temporary Mother Center in front of their panel and hung their quilt on the wall. Others added photos, brochures, and notices of workshops they were presenting next to their panels. Some borrowed the exhibition panels to use as visuals as they presented at meetings.

After Habitat II, the "Our Practices" exhibition was displayed at a few other locations and events in New York, Washington, D.C., and Nairobi. HC continued the process of documenting grassroots women's groups through its "Our Best Practices" campaign in the following years.



## NATIONAL CONGRESS OF NEIGHBORHOOD WOMEN (NW) A Network of Grassroots Women Leaders and Partners USA 1974



The National Congress of Neighborhood Women USA was founded in the Williamsburg-Greenpoint neighborhood of Brooklyn, New York. Since its inception, it has brought together women from diverse ethnic, race and class backgrounds to support each other's leadership. NW's leadership support, organizing and coalition-building strategies have generated a national core group working through 200 organizations in five regions and 23 states. NW is the North American focal point for GROATS (Grassroots Organizations Working Together in Sisterhood) North America and works in partnership with OPEN (European East-West Women's Network) in East Berlin.

NW believes that 'principled partnerships' are critical for the success of women's grassroots efforts. Principled partnerships within the NW network are made among women from diverse backgrounds - values and faith-based groups, concerned business people, schools, colleges and other nonprofit organizations. Principled partnerships include a shift in perspective from:

### What NW Stands for Our Community

Support  
Advocacy  
Education  
Leadership  
Organizing  
Partnership  
Solidarity  
Survival  
Transformation  
Vision

fragmented programs and services to values-based community development;  
charity focus to sharing power and resources;  
agencies set by funders to visions determined by communities;  
lack of accountability to mutually respectful relationships with basic agreements.



## WOMANSPIRIT, INC. St. Louis, MO, 1993

WomenSpirit is a resource center which was started by an informal African American faith based women's support group searching for "the room, the space" they needed. The group evolved from a loose network of women with diverse class and faith backgrounds to a cohesive group working to improve the quality of life of women and families. The all-women executive board is careful to anchor education, information and skill building endeavors in the experiences of people who have lived with poverty.



## BRONX NEIGHBORHOOD WOMEN Bronx, New York

A leadership support organizing model is the basic unit for much of NW's local organizing. NCNW asks emerging or veteran women leaders to take time to meet at least once a month to build relationships across identities, issues and organizations in their local area.



*"We believe the women's perspectives on comprehensive, sustainable community development can, and must, give balance to what exists to what exists today in the United States."*

## THE WOODLAND COMMUNITY LAND TRUST Clearfork, Tennessee 1977



LIVING IN CARING MAINTAIN ANCIENT LAND

In 1977, the Woodland Land Trust incorporated to realize its dream to acquire and redistribute land to local Appalachian people who had endured years of exploitation from the coal and timber companies. Absentee landowners and corporate interests owned 75 percent of the land and carried only 12 percent of the tax burden. Most people who live in Roosa Creek Hollow, Appalachia, where the land trust sits, are poor. Unemployment is 80% and half of the families receive some form of public assistance.



*"Women who face the stresses of poverty, racism, economic deprivation and have overcome them, are the best teachers of other women struggling under similar conditions."*

## NEIGHBORHOOD WOMEN OF WILLIAMSBURG-GREENPOINT (NWWG) Brooklyn, New York, USA 1988

For over 20 years, Neighborhood Women of Williamsburg Greenpoint, as part of the NCNW, has pursued redevelopment, education, and community leadership in Williamsburg Greenpoint. Despite serious urban poverty, this grassroots organization is noted for pioneering direct action and creative alternative development approaches, which are illustrated below.

### Neighborhood Women's Renaissance (1993)

This is a 33-unit housing complex built by and for women. Architect Karlin Adam met with grassroots women over years to design housing according to their needs and vision. This development pays tribute to the leadership of the grassroots women who gave years of their time to rebuild and stabilize their neighborhoods. It took these women ten years of sit-ins, law suits, political negotiations and proactive planning to finally be able to convert an abandoned hospital complex to multi-purpose housing and support services.



### You Can Community School (1986)

The You Can Community School, founded by grassroots women, has pioneered innovations for years. Young mothers bring their infants to school with them, concentrate on leadership training in addition to basic skills, and take on community and school development as part of their own self-empowerment. More than 100 young people participate each year, working with staff who themselves struggled through similar life experiences.



## "Our Practices"

Women, Homes and Community Super Coalition



# THE MOTHER CENTERS Germany

The Mother Centers are a grassroots "self-help" movement that developed over the last 15 years in Germany from a research project at the German Youth Institute in Munich (DJI). Young families were interviewed on their daily life situations and the kind of support systems they envisioned. As a test of the inherent responsibility of policy-oriented research, three model centers were funded in different German cities in the early 1980s by the Family Ministry, accompanied by three years of further DJI research. The resulting report was written by women involved in the first three Mother Centers. Entitled "Mothers in the Center—Mother Centers," it encouraged other women to open their own Mother Centers. At present, there are 400 centers throughout Germany, both in urban and rural settings. Depending on size and length of operation, Mother Centers reach between 50 to 500 families in their neighborhood. The movement is still growing, and is spreading into neighboring countries.

Having originated from a successful partnership of professionals (academic researchers) and community women, the overall Mother Center movement now uses professional partners for fundraising, networking, lobbying, training, and counseling. The centers themselves are self-managed and run by the mothers who frequent them.



Mother Centers succeed in empowering women by relating to their capacities, resources, and positive visions, rather than to their problems. A variety of groups and services, e.g., second-hand shops, sewing courses, repair services, and childcare service, can be found at these centers, and underscore the need for a place where community women are able to meet, exchange ideas and resources, build support networks, and integrate their expertise with that of others. This is especially relevant to former socialist countries, where old networks and systems of public participation have fallen apart and new economic and social structures must develop in their place, and where the labor market increasingly excludes women and cannot function as a system of social integration for all.

Wochenplan	
Non-Gepl. "Spontaneität" bei Mo-Do	
Freitag 17-19 Uhr	15-17 Uhr: Eltern-Eltern-Gespräch: Eltern als Experten für ihre Kinder, Eltern als Experten für ihre Kinder, Eltern als Experten für ihre Kinder.
Samstag 9-12 Uhr	9-12 Uhr: Eltern-Eltern-Gespräch: Eltern als Experten für ihre Kinder, Eltern als Experten für ihre Kinder, Eltern als Experten für ihre Kinder.
Sonntag 10-12 Uhr	10-12 Uhr: Eltern-Eltern-Gespräch: Eltern als Experten für ihre Kinder, Eltern als Experten für ihre Kinder, Eltern als Experten für ihre Kinder.
Montag 17-19 Uhr	17-19 Uhr: Eltern-Eltern-Gespräch: Eltern als Experten für ihre Kinder, Eltern als Experten für ihre Kinder, Eltern als Experten für ihre Kinder.
Dienstag 9-12 Uhr	9-12 Uhr: Eltern-Eltern-Gespräch: Eltern als Experten für ihre Kinder, Eltern als Experten für ihre Kinder, Eltern als Experten für ihre Kinder.
Mittwoch 10-12 Uhr	10-12 Uhr: Eltern-Eltern-Gespräch: Eltern als Experten für ihre Kinder, Eltern als Experten für ihre Kinder, Eltern als Experten für ihre Kinder.
Donnerstag 17-19 Uhr	17-19 Uhr: Eltern-Eltern-Gespräch: Eltern als Experten für ihre Kinder, Eltern als Experten für ihre Kinder, Eltern als Experten für ihre Kinder.

**"Our Practices"**  
Women, Homes and Community Super Coalition



**FOUNDATION FOR THE SUPPORT OF  
WOMEN'S WORK (FSWW)**  
Kadin Emegini Degerlendirme Vakfi -  
Istanbul, Turkey (1986)

The purpose of FSWW is to help low-income urban women become economically independent and improve the quality of their lives. It believes that this can be achieved by simultaneously increasing support services available to women (especially childcare), and opportunities for women's education and employment. Since its establishment in 1986, FSWW has organized capacity-building workshops for women on environmental health, nutrition, childcare, family planning, and participation in local government. It has opened five childcare centers in different districts of Istanbul, which also serve as education/training centers for women. It also operates a store for women's handicrafts, and a natural food and catering center. Currently, two more daycare centers, a home-based daycare program called "Neighborhood Mothers," and a technical assistance and micro-loan program called the "Women's Entrepreneurship Project" are underway.



**Project: Childcare Centers**

Parents play an important role in the operation of FSWW's childcare centers. They approve the budget, personnel, and nutrition programs. Staff is hired locally from the area. Each family contributes to the budget according to its means, and there is a wide range of income categories. Those who cannot afford it, don't pay. Parents help in food preparation, repairs, cleaning, and teaching. The curriculum is centered on children and their families, and encourages collaborative problem solving and learning by discovery. Teachers and parents develop educational programs together. These centers also serve as educational/training centers for women. Here, women participate in capacity-building workshops, and receive technical assistance to develop micro-enterprise projects.

The first childcare center based on this model was opened in Gungoren in 1987, followed by those in Kocasinan (1992) and Pendik (1994). Two more centers are about to start in Esenyurt and Kucukcekmece. During construction of new centers, training programs take place in women's homes. Currently, 250 children are enrolled at the centers, and until now, nearly 2,000 children and families have benefited from these programs.

FSWW works in partnership with district municipalities that support the centers by providing space and utilities. However, changes in local administration have created problems in the past. Families and community residents actively resisted the Kocasinan (1994) and Pendik (1995) municipalities' attempts to lose these centers.

**Project: "Karabiber" (Black Pepper)  
Natural Food and Catering Center**

Women who participated in the capacity-building programs in the Kocasinan Center initiated this project. It is based on a collaboration between urban and rural women. Rural women provide the food products that are often prepared at home, and urban women prepare the packaging and do the cooking for catering services. All participants receive training in business skills and skills for improving their daily lives. The food center now operates out of a store and kitchen located in the central part of Istanbul, and is oriented mainly to middle-income groups.

Still in its first year, the project is administered by a committee made up of one FSWW representative and three women from the community. At the end of the year, it will be financially self-supporting and fully self-managed. The project will benefit about 100 women in rural areas and at least 50 women from the low-income districts of Istanbul.



**"Our Practices"**

*Women, Homes and Community Super Coalition*



## Appendix B: Our Spaces Exhibition

World Urban Forum (WUF), Vancouver, 2004

After Habitat II, UN-Habitat started holding biennial world conferences focused on cities and urbanization. In 2006, Vancouver, Canada hosted the World Urban Forum 3 (WUF3), titled "Turning Ideas to Action," which was a fitting theme for highlighting real practices on the ground. HC/GROOTS cooperated with the local organization, GROOTS Canada, continuing its tradition of claiming space for grassroots women by having a large delegation at the conference and by leading many activities. One of these was the "Our Practices/Our Spaces" exhibition, which was mounted in the main WUF3 exposition area. "Our Practices" consisted of examples of 11 international and 16 national and local best practices in community development. "Our Spaces" highlighted 16 women's centers from around the world. Each was described using two 2'x2' panels of text and photos, totaling 86 panels.

Displaying in exhibition format has been a way to claim space at events which typically involve many people with large amounts of information to distribute and to absorb. The HC/GROOTS exhibits were intended to give the sense of the people and the environment, while summarizing the work of grassroots women's groups. These exhibits highlighted the individual groups but also present the work collectively, illustrating the global effect of grassroots women's achievements. As in the Habitat II Conference, the groups borrowed and used the panels for their own documentation and presentation purposes during the conference.



## The Polyclinic of Hope, Rwanda



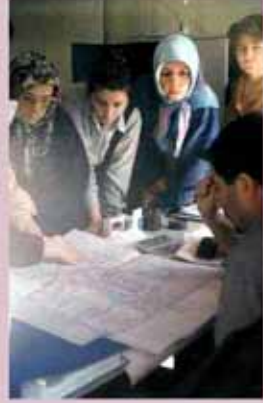
**Our Practices 2006 . Space**  
GROOTS - Huairou Commission

# Women and Children Center Mardin, Turkey



**Our Practices 2006 . Space**  
GROOTS - Huairou Commission

# Post-Disaster Women and Children Centers, Marmara Region, Turkey



**Our Practices 2006 . Space**  
GROOTS - Huairou Commission

**Women's Communication Centers  
(Mahiti Kendra)  
India**



A House for "Las Brumas"  
Union of Women's Cooperatives  
Nicaragua



mine

# Mother Centers

## Mother Centers International Network for Empowerment (mine)

Monica Jaeckel, Spijkerstraat 331, 6828 DK Arnhem, the Netherlands  
jaeckel@mine.cc; info@mine.cc

[www.mine.cc](http://www.mine.cc)

Mother Centers originated in Germany in the early eighties and have meanwhile spread into 15 countries, including: Albania, Austria, Bosnia, Burundi, Cameroon, Canada, Czech Republic, Germany, Italy, Kenya, Netherlands, Rwanda, Slovak Republic, Switzerland and USA. The success of the Mother Centers is based on a set of carefully defined principles that work together to create basic innovations and social change. To date more than 750 Mother Centers exist worldwide. Mother Centers seem to answer a historic need. They recreate family and neighborhood structures where they have been weakened by modernization (Germany, USA), by socialist regimes (Czech Republic, Slovakia), by war (Bosnia, Rwanda), or by poverty and aids (Kenya, Cameroon). The mine network stands for a world that places social cohesion and community building at the base of development, re-integrates the culture of care into public life and recognizes the central role of women in peace building and development. mine has been certified as a Best Practice by UN Habitat and won the Dubai International Award for Best Practices to Improve the Living Environment.

### The Space:

**Challenge:** Safety in urban environments is a question of social cohesion.

**Answer:** MC provide a safe haven for women and children as well as recreating a sense of community in urban environments.

**Challenge:** Violence, anonymity, pollution, exclusion are threatening the livability of cities.

**Answer:** Family friendly cities and the reintegration of children and the elderly as part of public life make cities more livable for us all.

**Challenge:** The compartmentalization of life in work and family, public and private, excludes women from the formal economy as well as public decision making.

**Answer:** MCs integrate collective action geared towards all aspects of life simultaneously under one roof. such as childcare, peer counseling, savings groups, hot lunches, social enterprises, advocacy, skill/capacity development, governance and much more.

### Sub Themes:

- \* Governance
- \* International community
- \* Social Services
- \* Advocacy
- \* Safety

mine

Mother Centers



Our Practices 2006 - Space  
GROOTS - Huairou Commission



## The Communal Dining Room Lima, Peru

### Estrategia (Center of Investigation and Action For Urban Development)

Luz María Sánchez Hurtado Calle Marques de Torre Tagle N° 161, Miraflores, Lima, Perú  
marilush@terra.com.pe

Since 1989 the NGO Estrategia has worked in Lima's poorest neighborhoods to introduce alternative approaches to development from the perspectives of low-income women, and supported women to organize and participate in the process. With NGO trainings, women's groups organized to produce building materials out of concrete (blocks, roofs, steps, beams, paving stones) and started their own micro-enterprises, selling building materials other neighborhoods of Lima. These enterprises created work opportunities as well as enabling women and men to build decent housing and community facilities.

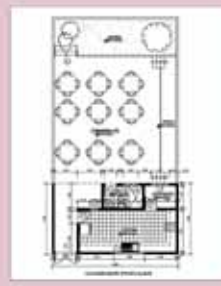
### The Space:

In 2003 women living in the district of Ventanilla approached Estrategia for help to build a communal dining room. Estrategia partnered with the local government of Ventanilla and La Generalitat from Catalunya in Barcelona to build an 80 square meter space that women use as a base for their community organizing activities. Women manage the dining room with food support from PRONAA, a National Food Program. Each woman who is involved in food preparation receives a number of meals according to the number of children she has. Women also use the CDR to organize their meetings, educational and livelihood programs which support women's micro-enterprises, including the production of chocolates, jewelry, sewing clothing, ceramics, leather purses and much more.

### Sub-themes:

- Community development with gender equity
- Health, water and sanitation
- Environmental sustainability
- Income generation (micro-enterprises)
- Local governance and democracy

# The Communal Dining Room Lima, Peru



**Our Practices 2006 . Space**  
GROOTS - Huairou Commission

# Mothers Development Centre Nairobi, Kenya

## GROOTS Kenya

Esther Mwaura, P.O. Box 10320-GPO Nairobi, Kenya  
grootsk@grootskenya.org, esther.mwaura@grootskenya.org

GROOTS Kenya, a network of now over 1,000 grassroots women's self-help groups and organizations across Kenya, was established in 1995 to strengthen the role of grassroots women's groups in community development through direct participation in decision-making, planning and implementation. The groups' development agenda ranges from shelter, environment, income generation, human rights, gender equality, social integration to moral support. The network collaborates with other African groups on the HIV/AIDS pandemic and other regional and international exchanges on innovative practices, encourages savings groups, and builds the capacity of women to directly participate in development forums at the local, national, regional and global level.

## The Space:

Mother Development Centre is located at the edge of the Mathare Valley slum. The centre grew from a two-room mud brick building with a tin roof to four separate rooms as new programs were developed out of community needs. At first the center provided a permanent meeting space for women and safe childcare for working mothers. As HIV/AIDS spread, the group started offering support to families and training trainers to care for people living with the disease. "Living positively" programs -- street theatre, personal history records-- involved and provided psychological support to street kids and youth. The youth now run laundry services and do other income generation projects through their own room. In 2002, another room was rented as the women, working with donated knitting machines, started training young girls and orphans how to knit. GROOTS Kenya has purchased a plot of land and is now seeking funding to realize its vision to create a multi-purpose building with a large meeting hall, workshops, guest rooms, shops, and childcare, youth and literacy centers.

## Sub Themes:

- \* Capacity building and leadership support
- \* HIV/AIDS
- \* Income generation
- \* Community development with gender equity
- \* Local governance

# Mothers Development Centre Nairobi, Kenya



**Our Practices 2006 . Space**  
GROOTS - Huairou Commission

# Cabo Women's Center

Centro das Mulheres do Cabo



Contact: Silvia Cordeiro • [silvia@mulheresdocabo.org.br](mailto:silvia@mulheresdocabo.org.br)

The Center operates in the Metropolitan Area of Recife and in rural areas, most prominently in "Mata Sul" micro-region of Pernambuco. Our mission is to increase gender equity and uphold women's citizenship rights. We work with women of all racial backgrounds and ages.

We use community development processes to provide education on human, economic, social, cultural, environmental and gender rights.

## Our Key Achievements:

- In 2004, the Centre, in a joint network action with social movements, NGOs and government institutions created the Democracy & Women Project as a means to enhance and strengthen women presence in legislative bodies and leading power positions in the Northeast of Brazil. The main mechanism used to mobilize women in their communities is the **Women's Radio** station.
- We founded the **Feminist School in Communities** as a strategic action to pursue women's empowerment and to ensure human rights for a just and sustainable society.
- We constructed a Community Center in Barbalho.
- A rotating fund was established to finance the improvement of shanty houses and water wells.
- Women's leadership is now recognized in communities.
- The democratization of decision making processes with partners is now a reality.
- We have enabled and strengthened women's public voices.
- Youth are involved in the community organizations and activities.

## Sub themes:

Claiming Space / Governance / Peer Learning / Knowledge Sharing

**CABO DE SANTO AGOSTINHO, BRAZIL**

**OUR PRACTICES 2006**

GROOTS • HUAIROU COMMISSION



Centro das Mulheres do Cabo

# Cabo Women's Center



**OUR PRACTICES 2006**  
GROOTS • HUAIROU COMMISSION



# The Network of Mother Centers in the Czech Republic

Contact: Rut Kolínská • sit.mc@centrum.cz

The first Mother Center was founded 14 years ago. We now have 150 Mother Centres in the Czech Republic. Our main goal is to provide support and methodological guidance for newly established Mother Centres. We organize projects on a national and international scale, and cooperate with governing bodies and with partner organizations abroad.

## Our Key Messages:

- Mother Centers are founded on the principle of family self-support, in most cases have been established by mothers on maternity leave, who share the leadership and create the program at the same time.
- The Centers enable mothers to come out of the isolation of their daily care duties at home and come into a supportive community center, open to all generations.
- Every Mother Centre in our country has its own public living space –a space to generate ideas for changing our community, our lives and our society.
- The members do not wait on local governments, instead, they start to change their urban environment themselves –building playgrounds, cycleways and other needed amenities.
- The Radost project “**Paths for Little Pedestrians**” is one of our successes. The goal of the project is to generate discussion about a form of urban space which would respect children of pre-school age and in the early years of school –a child-friendly town. There is currently a lack of space for children’s play and recreational space. The aim of the exhibition is not only to initiate discussion, but to enable visitors to play a role in the proposals, to bring the proposals to fruition, and to persuade the local authorities that it makes sense to make changes to unpleasant and sometimes even dangerous urban spaces.



Sub themes:  
Claiming Space / Safety and Urban Environment  
Peer Learning /Knowledge Sharing

PRAGUE, CZECH REPUBLIC



The Network of Mother Centers  
in the Czech Republic



