

# Mother Centres in Central and Eastern Europe and the Gambia

## **Mothers in Central and Eastern Europe are leading the way in empowering women in their communities.**

Mother Centres provide women with a vehicle for forging social networks and organizing community activities that support women in their roles as mothers and caregivers. Initiated in Germany in the 1980s, the Mother Centres movement has spread to Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Georgia and the Russian Federation.

Mother Centres arose in response to a perceived lack of support for mothers in their communities. In many Central and Eastern European countries, the tradition of community networks was dismantled under socialist rule. Since the transition of the early 1990s, high unemployment, poverty, political instability and a decrease in public childcare and support services have compounded the sense of social isolation experienced by many mothers and children. Mother Centres offer women and families an opportunity to access practical resources and social support. The centres help address the financial needs of families through services such as second-hand shops, meals, toy libraries, sewing and language classes, and job retraining programmes.

Neighbourhood Mother Centres reach between 50 and 500 families and have helped transform the lives of thousands of women in the region. Interviews with those involved testify to the positive impact that the centres are having on women and families: 58 per cent of women said they learned

how to participate and speak up, while 55 per cent felt that their confidence had increased since joining the centres. A survey of men who participated in some of the events revealed that 67 per cent had a positive view towards family responsibilities.

By empowering women to enhance their quality of life, Mother Centres are helping to revitalize neighbourhoods and fostering a new sense of hope among women and families. In 46 per cent of cases, Mother Centres are represented in municipal councils. The success of the movement has inspired other women to replicate the model, and there are now 750 centres worldwide. This dramatic growth illustrates the powerful impact that women can have when they mobilize. It demonstrates women's tremendous capacity to lead the way in empowering themselves and those around them.

## **The Gambia**

### **A similar initiative is operating in the Gambia, where women are banding together to promote girls' education at the community level.**

In the Gambia, Mothers Clubs provide a unique platform for women to raise financial and moral support for girls' education. Through advocacy and fund-raising campaigns, women are expanding the educational opportunities available to girls and asserting the right to have their voices heard in their communities.

Mothers Clubs operate in some of the Gambia's most impoverished regions, where most families eke out a living from subsistence farming, and few can support the cost of educating all

of their children. Although primary education is free in the Gambia, other hidden expenses, such as uniforms, writing materials and school lunches, can make education costs prohibitive. Owing to a range of economic, social and cultural factors, most parents prioritize boys' education; girls account for only 19 per cent of students in primary school in some poor communities.

Women are among the most vocal advocates of gender parity in schools. Advocacy campaigns organized by women promote access to education for girls, and focus attention on the retention and performance of girls in schools. UNICEF and the Forum for African Women Educationalists are supporting women in their roles as community advocates. UNICEF has provided the Mothers Clubs with seed money for income-generating activities, including gardening, making batik, tie-dye, soap and pomade manufacturing, poultry farming and crop cultivation, and has provided milling machines that give families an additional source of food and income and release women and girls from the burden of daily milling. Income generated from these entrepreneurial initiatives is used to pay for school fees, uniforms and shoes for girls in the community. Mothers Clubs have also invested their profits in providing interest-free loans to other disadvantaged women so that they can initiate their own income-generating activities.

Since the programme's inception, women have established 65 Mothers Clubs in three regions of the Gambia. The movement is having a visible impact on girls' education. Girls'

enrolment rates increased on average by 34 per cent, and the incidence of girls withdrawing from school due to early marriage has diminished sharply.

Mothers Clubs are creating new opportunities for women, in addition to girls. By providing women with the skills and resources needed to generate their own sources of income, Mothers Clubs are helping to empower women in their communities. Moreover, by persuasively arguing the case for girls' education, women are challenging gender discrimination and highlighting the importance of women's involvement in community decision-making processes, an achievement that will benefit current and future generations of women and girls.

*See References, page 88.*