

GWIA 2000 Groups



PROFILES OF GROUPS PRESENTING AT GWIA

Mothers Platform Baden Wuerttemberg, Germany

(Andrea Laux, Jutta Dervisevic and Roswitha Reichart)

The Mothers Platform is a network of mother centers in the region of Baden Wuerttemberg, German, addressing the marginalisation of housewives and community women and supporting their reentry into public life, not primarily via the traditional feminist routes of labor market participation and professional careers, but by creating direct channels to increase the participation of neighborhood women in local governance and decision making with special attention to the needs and views of families and children.

The focus is on the quality of human settlements, community planning and community development. Habitat is seen not only as a built environment, a flourishing economic market and an efficient transportation system, but as a social community, involving family life and neighborhood relations, what experts tend to call „social capital“. The expertise of women on these issues, based on their everyday life experience is fed into local governance through channels which usually did not exist before the existence of mother centers and which usually are also not foreseen and included in local governance procedures.

Some of the issues to which the Mothers Platform has contributed practical knowledge and expertise include: Munciple childcare, playgrounds, safety in urban environments, community recreation assets, green belts in the community, youth programs, municipal family policies, environmental health issues, housing and the development of residential areas.

Some examples:

- ✓ When the women from the four mother centers in the city of Stuttgart were invited to present their project in the city hall, they went - as always - with their children. This - as always - was not foreseen by the municipal admisistration. There was nothing provided for children. Used to improvising, the mothers quickly organised some blankets, toys and a mobild coffee table and created their own little mother center in one corner of the city hall.
- ✓ From then on the Mothers Platform made it a point to demand childcare whenever they are invited to munciple meetings. It is now standard procedure in the municipality of Stuttgart that childcare is provided on request indside administrative buildings during political meetings.
- ✓ Following the reunification of Germany, many US army bases were vacated as a result of the reduction of US troups stationed in Germany. The Mothers Platform is involved in replanning these residential areas, with a focus on creating neighborhood and intergenerational meeting points as an integral part of community infrastructure.
- ✓ The mother center in Reutlingen took their mayor on a „Walk through town“ to look at the urban environment „through the eyes of a woman with a child at her hand“. They pointed out places that were inaccessible with children ´s buggies or were dangerous for children and initiated improvements including pedestrean lanes, family friendly parking spaces and.
- ✓ the installation of red lights at dangerous crossings.

SOS Mother Center 2000 Salzgitter Bad, Germany

(Dorothee Schooss)

Mother centers originated in Germany as result of a research project conducted at the Deutsches Jugendinstitut (DJI), the German Youth Institut in Munich. The mother center Salzgitter is one of the three original model centers which were funded by the German Family Ministry and which put together the book „Mothers in the Center - Mother Centers“, the book that created the mother center movement that has produced to date 400 mother centers in West and in East Germany and is spreading rapidly to other parts of the world.

What proves to be so inspiring to women ´s groups across the world is the mother center approach to reevaluate the experience of motherhood in comtemporany societies, and to reevaluate the skills andcompetencies that are learned in daily life with children and in the neighborhoods. This counterbalances the increase of professionalisation in social work and brings the grassroots voice and grassroots wisdom to the table. Mother centers claim public space for women and children, a „public living room“ as the centers are

sometimes described. Children are always a welcome part of life in the mother centers, but the mothers are the center of attention.

Mother centers are meeting points in the community for mothers and children and create a platform to bring the resources and talents of caregivers out of the confined area of private homes back into the community. Activities center around the drop in coffee shop and include:

- ✓ Projects that help lower the expenses for families like second-hand shops, hair cutting, midday meals, sewing classes and repair services
- ✓ Crisis counselling and support
- ✓ Know-how on parenting
- ✓ Language and computer courses
- ✓ Relaxation and holistic health services
- ✓ Job training and job creation
- ✓ Advocacy groups on issues like the impact of pollution on children's health, children as poverty risk number one in affluent societies like Germany etc.

Mother centers operate on a grassroots self help basis. The experts in the centers are the mothers themselves. They promote the importance of the remuneration of women's work in the family and the neighborhood. Activities in the centers are paid.

Over the years activities of the mother centers expand into the community. The mother center Salzgitter was pioneer in creating the „Neighborhood Services“ offering proximity services like childcare, pick up services, laundry services, shopping services, lunch and catering services and eldercare to the community, thus creating employment and family friendly jobs for mother center women as well as reviving and deepening intergenerational neighborhood care and support structures.

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

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

The family like quality in mother centers comes about by creating mixed teams of neighborhood women and professionals, drawing both on professional expertise as well as on the expertise of family and neighborhood women whose qualifications come from practical experience in coping with everyday life.

This has proved to be a successful response to the increasing isolation of families in urban settings and the decrease of social cohesion in extended family and neighborhood structures and a valid alternative to further commodification of services in the care sector. The introduction of a new eldercare insurance system in Germany i.e. has raised concern and debate on the question of quality as it has created a focus on the medical aspects of care as defined and covered by the insurance, leading to a neglectance of relational aspects like listening and talking to the person cared for, doing small favors, remembering birthdays etc. as these are time consuming and are not paid by the insurance scheme.

Quality in care services is often brought about by personal factors, trust and unwritten rules of true caring, quite different to the „easy in - easy out“ culture which larger commercial suppliers and market orientation have imported into the area of care provision. Especially in the case of the elderly, care and proximity services often provide

the only social contacts and social networks they have access to, so that the relational and contact aspects of these services are of great importance. Proximity services in a community context like in the mother centers in this sense can be understood as close-by, not only in a geographical sense close, but also in an emotional and social sense close, involving neighborly contact, communication and support. This approach also has the advantage of simultaneously pooling the resources and skills of the elderly to contribute to the neighborhood networks, embedding eldercare in a more reciprocal process of neighborly exchange, which is experienced as confidence boosting by the elderly in need of care services.

The women who work in the Salzgitter project enjoy the flexibility that is possible in reconciling their work and family life due to the neighborhood services to which they also have access themselves. The children can experience their mothers at work and they are also integrated into an intergenerational neighborhood setting. The whole building is designed in a way that welcomes children. Children are not confined to certain areas and childcare programs, but are an integral part of the whole house. In the Salzgitter Mother Center 2000 you meet children everywhere and you meet adults who are used to dealing with and attending to children's needs.

The mother center movement counteracts historical trends of modernisation, specialisation and professionalisation in industrialised societies that have clientalised and compartmentalised family and community life and have alienated and dried up neighborhood networks. The mandate of the mother center movement is to improve the quality of human settlements by reviving neighborhood networks and community life, creating a place where the elder generation can interact with the youth, where a culture of care and caring, authentic relationships and neighborliness can grow. In the 20 years they exist, the mother centers with their self-help and peer learning approach have proved to be a „school of life“ for the development of tolerance, conflict resolution, leadership, and crisis support skills in the neighborhood, embedded in the culture of care that mother centers value and cultivate.

Circle of Life Foundation, USA

(Nancie Four Waters)

The Circle of Life foundation is a part of the California North Coast environmental movement in the USA engaged in preventing the logging down of the ancient redwood forests on the Northern Californian Coast. They engage in direct action like gate blockades and tree sits against the federally brokered Headwaters Forest Agreement and the illegal and destructive logging practices of Pacific Lumber Company.

The Californian environmental movement specialises in direct actions, humorous actions and audacious actions, which attract media attention. They keep an amorphous group structure and form affinity groups that work with the legal system regularly.

The most famous action was the tree sit of Julia Butterfly Hill on the over 1000 year old redwood tree known as Luna, which as a result was saved from logging along with a 300 foot logging ban surrounding Luna. Julia Butterfly Hill lived for 738 days on Luna on a six by eight foot tarp covered platform 180 feet above the ground and survived a 90 miles per hour storm. On December 15 1999 she signed the Luna Preservation Agreement with Pacific Lumber Company.

„Those things of real worth in life are worth going to any length in love and respect to safeguard“ Julia says.

The environmental movement in North California is dedicated to defend against further degradation of the Redwood Forest ecosystem, one of the last 3% of the world ´s ancient redwoods.

SSP (Self Education for Women ´s Empowerment), India (Suranjana Gupta)

SSP works with 10 000 women, organised in 558 savings and credit groups in 300 villages. SSP functions on the principle that the most effective means for women to learn is through a process of self learning experiments and collective analysis of their own experiences. This means creating tools and learning forums to enhance women ´s capacities to learn and to transfer knowledge , as well as to negotiate with institutional actors to access and manage resources for their communities. After the major earthquake in 1996 in the Latur and Osmanabad districts of the State of Maharashtra in India SSP organised women collectives to become active in post earthquake government rehabilitation programs making earthquake resistant technologies more accessible to people.

In order to achieve long term benefits SSP adopted the strategy of investing in few demonstration villages. These villages become sites of ongoing experimentation, where people were enabled to develop their own solutions and innovations and to transmit their experiences to neighboring villages.

The involvement of women in the rebuilding of their houses was based on the method of mapping their old houses and planning their to be reconstructed houses seeking a functional use of space. Very soon mapping emerged as a powerful participatory tool to activate women ´s groups, who showed great skills in planning the new houses as well as in supervising the construction process and in checking on sustainability and quality.

This took women to the forefront of the reconstruction process and further to leadership roles in development programs at village level, based on their superb performance. Women took their work very seriously, helping the house owners to properly plan their new houses, supervising the masons work and the correctness of the activity of the engineers. Women proved to be less prone to corruptions. They used their newly aquired skills and knowledge during the reconstruction process for the benefit of the whole village and that infrastructure funds at the village level go towards something that is urgently required. They initiated community development projects like sanitation, water supply, food security through the rationing system, community health care centers, information centers, schools or forestry. They did not stop working once the official mandate of the government reconstruction program (six months) was over and their salary came to an end.

A survey undertook in 115 villages in the Latur District showed that in villages with female leadership the number of houses completed was considerably higher than in villages without female leadership in the reconstruction process.

The women are now transferring this process by building information centers for Women in other areas. SSP also transferred their experiences and knowledge to other disaster areas, like Turkey that experienced a severe earthquake in 1999 and to Gujarat in India that was hit by a devastating earthquake in 2001. They support communities in mobilising local resources and leveraging new resources to build low-cost earthquake resistant buildings, built with local building materials and appropriate technologies and by skilled women masons and work with local grassroots groups to open the possibility of women participating in the planning of new settlements and the managing of services in the new settlements.

GROOTS Exchange (USA, Papua New Guinea, Kenya, Canada)

(Mary Tyler, Donna Ashman, Gail Yardy, Jan Peterson)

From 1998 – 2000 GROOTS International organised a four country grassroots exchange program from which found it's completion in a one day workshop at the June week of GWIA 2000.

Grassroots Women's groups from Kenya, Canada, Papua New Guinea and the US visited each other in their respective countries and learned „on site“ about each others experiences and strategies on issues of environment, community economic development, gender relations and leadership support.

In Kenya the groups toured projects on infrastructure, drainage, lighting, public latrines, housing and tree planting projects. The women from PNG were shocked to see what a country looks like that has lost their forests and what poverty means in urban slums where the relationship to nature and subsistence farming has been cut. They received another understanding of the wealth of their own nature and culture at home and resolved not to let such a development happen in their country.

In Papua New Guinea at each village and town where the exchange took place, local women joined the group, travelling on to visit other parts of their country. For many, this was the first time they had had the opportunity to connect with women from other regions and to do networking on women's work in PNG: The visitors from the US, Canada and Kenya were impressed with the strong sense of community that still prevails and with the sustainable attitude of native tribes towards natural resources, exemplified for example by a portable sawmill that four clans operate together, supporting each other in what logging is done and logging only what the community needs.

In the USA the groups visited the Tennessee Women's Land Trust, where grassroots groups purchased a mountain as a cooperative in order to save the forest from logging and to save a 500 inhabitant village from dying out as well as an ecological farm that specialises also on alternative birth practices.

ORAP (Organisation of Rural Associations for Progress), Zimbabwe

(Thandiwe Nkomo and Grace Moyo)

ORAP is a rural organisation with female leadership comprising 1,5 million members. Main goals are to eradicate poverty in all its forms and to promote self reliance with skills derived from traditional African culture.

„We are not poor - we are impoverished“ is the guiding principle of ORAP. They focus on tapping into the strength and potential of communities to find their own way out of hunger and poverty. Linking to traditional African culture is seen as a powerful way to empower local communities to take control of their own development. It enables people to value themselves, their culture and their own skills.

ORAP organises by family and neighborhood units which are self-defined and not necessarily nuclear. Sustainable development comes from learning to improve living conditions and to enhance opportunities as a unit, each member of the unit identifying their individual talents and the ways they can best contribute to the collective. The idea being that everyone has a purpose in life and a role to play.

The family units are encouraged to improve their articulation and communication skills, their family relationships, their homes, family health, hygiene and childcare. They are supported to engage in activities that create employment for the community, produce goods and generate income. Gender dimensions are interwoven into all ORAP programs.

Main issues ORAP deals with is the provision of water and irrigation, food security and diseases like malaria, dysentery, polio, tuberculosis and HIV/AIDS.

ORAP encourages people to value work for their own development rather than work in the labor market which exploits their labor and is part of a globalisation agenda they do not control. People work on home improvement projects, gardening, water provision and crafts sold through the ORAP Zenzele Cottage Industry Shop.

ORAP has created own enterprises and businesses including farms, hotels, gas stations and a hardware shop. The latest initiative is a self managed community foundation to keep the flow of money in the community and to be able to finance community projects in areas like health and education independent of foreign donors.

Foundation for the Support of Women's Work, FSWW, Turkey

(Berrin Yenice and Nurdane Caglar)

FSWW operates in low income areas in Istanbul and the regions hit by the big Marmara earthquake in 1999. The focus is to support the efforts of women to improve the quality of their lives, to provide credit, training, education and counseling services for women to establish their own businesses and their own income. FSWW started 4 parent run childcare centers in Istanbul and 8 in the earthquake areas. They have created Micro Credit Projects for Women and established outlets for women's businesses and products like the Karabiber Natural Food Center that supports rural and urban women to obtain income by selling their home based food products.

At the Bakirköy Handicrafts Center handmade products such as laceworks, head scarves, glass art, knitted works and painted fabrics are sold. Painted dolls and toys produced by women in the tents and temporary structures of the earthquake areas are sold in government outlets in airports and department stores.

The Foundation facilitates and supports women to define their problems, to produce solutions for these problems and to reveal and activate their own resources and potentials. The projects of FSWW are built on the expertise of local grassroots women helping them create social space and organisational platforms from which they can access local politics, have a voice in the community and get involved in constructing their neighborhoods.

The main issue in the earthquake areas is reconstruction of housing and infrastructure. Through the Women and Children Centers FSWW organised in these areas women are getting involved and playing key roles in the post disaster planning and reconstruction process.

Mother Center Cooperatives, Canada

(Penny Kerrigan)

Canada has special needs related to a multicultural society and to the growing urban First Nation population. Aboriginal people are the poorest in the country and face discrimination of their culture. Canada is rated worldwide number 17 for child poverty. However in this rating the 66 aboriginal reserves in Canada were not counted. If they would be taken into account Canada would rate number 67 in child poverty.

The historical policies of the government to place aboriginal families in reserves and send their children away from their families to residential schools where their language and culture was repressed and their ties to their community and their extended families were broken has left a dysfunctional community where there are many cases of child abuse, family violence, alcoholism, drug abuse and prostitution.

Teen births are 13 times higher among the aboriginal population than the population at large. 50% of children in foster care are aboriginal children. They are often apprehended for reasons like coming to school with dirty clothes because the mother could not afford laundry detergent.

There are very few preventive programs for these issues in Canada and many aboriginal women feel culturally uncomfortable in institutional programs. There is an immediate need for places where this group of mothers can gather without being stigmatized as clients of various social service agencies. The Mother Center Cooperatives offer aboriginal families a safe place to go, a place to be with their children. A place to be with their own culture. It gives many aboriginal women who didn't see a future hope and a dream and new inspiration.

The principle economic strategy of the Canadian mother center cooperatives is to organise as cooperatives, starting up businesses like catering and children's line of clothing that belong to the mothers in the centers collectively.

In the understanding of the First Nation communities mother centers are recreating the tradition of Long Houses with everything under one roof: Taking care of the young and the old, a health center, shared meals, and shared businesses.

Victoria 21, Bulgaria

(Miglene Ivanova)

Victoria 21 works in Sofia, Bulgaria with families of single mothers in need to support their self confidence and to inspire them to trust in their own strength, skills and capabilities. They aim and changing the neagative attitudes of Bulgarian society and many institutions toward single mothers.

According to surveys conducted by Victoria 21 82 % of single mothers in Sofia work on the black labor market with minimal wages. 70% of their children start working illegally at the age of 13. 90% of the single mothers do not trust the institutions, which should aid them. Unemployed single mothers tend to self-isolate to an extent that is often dangerous for the existence of their families.

Main focus and activities of Victoria 21 is establishing and maintaining contacts with single mother families, organising courses for professional qualification, creating services like health services, a library for clothes, shoes and toys, a study-hall for school children, and consultations for social support and operating a tayloring atelier employing 15 women.

„We uphold the equality, financial independence and the dignity of single mother families is Sofia“

Area Relief Ministries, USA

(Mary Tyler)

Area Relief Ministries in Jackson, USA are a collaboration of churches aiming to raise the awareness of poverty that exists in the community and providing coordinated and cost-effective emergency aid as well as supporting the empowerment of the poor to become self-sufficient. Emercency assistance includes utility assistance, purchase of prescription medication, food vouchers, summer fans, school supplies and various other needs not met by existing agencies.

Self sufficiency case management as well as micro business development programs is provided to individuals and families in form of trainings, financial help and support they need to market their skills and talents.

Area Relief Ministries operate three peer lending groups and individual development accounts, which are a new approach to poverty alleviation. Individual development accounts are restricted savings accounts set up in the name of low-income individuals. They are restricted to hight return investments such as attending college, starting a business or buying a home. If the saver attends financial literacy training, each earned dollar they save is matched by two.

80% of low income housholds in Tennessee are headed by women, so a focus is on bringing more opportunities to women to establish businesses and incomes.

Area Resource Ministries is funded by 35 different churches representing about 13 different denominations.

Czech Mother Centers

(Rut Kolinskà and Jitka)

The first mother center in the Czech Republic opened in 1992 in Prague following the German model which was presented at a seminar in the fall of 1991.

Since then the movement has spread „like a virus“ throughout the Czech Republic, where there are currently 120 mother centers, both in rural and urban areas. For anyone familiar with the situation in post socialist countries this is truly amazing, as community based grassroots initiatives are very rare in these societies.

The mother centers are attractive to women in the Czech Republic for a variety of reasons:

- ✓ After the experience of a „collectivation“ of children and child rearing under the communist regime, which in the Czech Republic was seen by a large part of the population as being imposed on them, there is a keen interest on the part of parents to take charge and consciously influence the way their children grow up.
- ✓ Mother centers create a possibility for peer learning, for parents to exchange views and experiences and information on parenting.
- ✓ Mother centers create a meeting point in the neighborhoods, breaking through the often anonymous and isolating structures of residential areas in post socialist societies.
- ✓ Mother centers are an opportunity for children to meet other children.
- ✓ Mother centers are a switch board for information resources, skills and support for every day life survival issues.
- ✓ Mother centers create a structure and platform for families to identify and voice their interests and to engage in active advocacy for family and community issues.
- ✓ Activities in the centers include play groups, nursing groups, language courses, courses on ecology and in alternative health care, discussion groups on child rearing,, the agenda 21, 2nd hand shop, toy library, family excursions etc.

Some quotes:

„The daily events in the center and the family excursions on weekends and holidays have created a sense of community that means very much to me. I would have never thought that I would meet so many people who still have the capacity to do something with and for others.“

„Before the 2nd world war mothers and families were respected. Communism destroyed much of that. In the centers the responsible work that mothers do is acknowledged and there is respect again for family values. We apply this not only to the home but also to public life, to make our communities and our society more child and people friendly.“

„In the center you see how others solve their conflicts and problems. People with different social backgrounds come together and learn to deal with each other and their differences. This is a daily school for democracy. And also children learn to deal with various social situations.“

„I can play with my children much better in the group than at home. We can support each other as mothers. And we have learned to be more self confident with children in public. Before children were not to be seen in public, now we go on trips and excursions with our children.“

The mother center initiatives are started by small groups of mothers, usually 2 or 3 friends who hear about the centers in via newspaper articles, radio and TV shows or by word of mouth. They negotiate for rooms with the municipality or with churches, foundations and NGOs.

In 1999 the national association „Network of Czech Mother Centers“ was established which offers start up consultancy, has put together written materials on how to start mother centers and conducts yearly national conferences for the mother centers in the country.

Union de Vecinos

(Alvivoon Hurd, Elizabeth Blaney, Vanessa Miramontes)

Public housing is being cut back in the United States nation wide. The Los Angeles based group Union de Vecinos is a group of grassroots residents fighting for the right for affordable housing in the United States. By destroying perfectly sound housing and reducing the number of affordable housing units, the pressures put on the poor and especially on women are tremendous.

When tearing down public housing units in order to free the space for more profitable development the communities are often split up and divided to keep down resistance. Residents are put into different categories with different promises of relocation that make it hard for neighbors to organise and create a unity of purpose. The Union de Vecinos counteracts these strategies. Union de Vecinos uses a community organising approach that draws from the community's culture, from women's household skills and a reservoir of community strengths to publicly express: „This is our community, these are our homes, these are our children, we have a right to housing, we have a right to community“

Union de Vecinos focus their efforts on defending both the right of ethnic minorities and the poor to housing as well as on defending the quality of neighborhoods and community that many public housing compounds foster.

Tearing down public housing is seen as a way of weakening low income communities by individualising families and dispersing low income culture and voting power.

A big part of their work goes into analysing the situation, debunking myths about what is happening and giving out correct information:

- ✓ Often people are told that their homes are being torn down because they are structurally unsound and dangerous to live in. Very often this is claimed for perfectly good housing units.
- ✓ Often people are told that they will be relocated into equitable housing, when in truth what will happen is that they receive a piece of paper saying that the public authorities will pay half of their rent that many landlords around the city will not accept.
- ✓ Often people are told their housing is not being destroyed but only newly built, when what is really happening is that housing is destroyed for the poor and newly built for more affluent income brackets.

By organising communities in public housing Union de Vecinos is giving voice and visibility to a scandalous process, the taking of housing from the poor, that in many areas of the United States is proceeding with very little public awareness

National Association of Mother Centers, USA (NAMC)

(Jeanine Emch, Karen Woodmansee, Linda L. Juergens, Sherry Radowitz, Lorri Slepian, Denise Joost, Laurel Zydney, Kathy Clark and Diane Unkirch)

The National Association of Mother Centers is a network of Mother Centers across the USA organising community spaces to enhance the quality of life for mothers and their children. The mission of the National Association of Mother Centers (NAMC) USA is to enable members to be effective in using their individual and collective knowledge and experience as a catalyst for personal and societal changes that benefit mothers and families. While each Mother Centre is unique they share the following core concepts:

- ✓ A respect for, attention to and inquiry about motherhood, maternal thinking, knowledge and experience.
- ✓ Information programs and activities that inspire the highest level of development for the participant, the family and the organisation.
- ✓ A structure that encourages each participant to become an equitable shareholder in the program.
- ✓ A supportive group environment that promotes empathy, interaction and cohesiveness, encourages growth and fosters building relationships.
- ✓ An enhancement of the participants ability to advocate effectively for change that benefits women and families.

✓
Activities include:

Courses in child development

Retreats of mothers with their pre teen daughters to stabilise the mother daughter relationship to survive the challenges of puberty.

On site programs in corporations to support parents in balancing work and family obligations.

Advocacy activities like the Million Mom March against gun violence and easy accessibility of guns.

The NAMC are committed to consensus decision making and use consensus decision making methodology in all aspects of their work.. They offer facilitators training both to benefit the work in the centers as well as to offer their women marketable skills which they can use to create jobs and reenter the labor market.

SPARC (Society for the Promotion of Area Resource Centers) (Sheela Patel)

SPARC originated in Bombay, India, a city that is populated by two sets of people, those who live in buildings and formal structures and those who live in slums. 50% of the citizens in Bombay live in informal settings. SPARC works both locally and nationally in federation with Mahila Milan, a women's pavement dwellers organisation and the National Slum Dwellers Federation and internationally with slum dwellers organisations from around the world.

After floods, catastrophes and riots all over the country poor people migrate into the city to survive. Often people can earn more money in the cities than in the rural areas and cities promise access to schools, water, medical care.

Their only access to housing is self built shacks and lean tos on public ground.

SPARC has developed a bottom up approach to housing the urban poor. They organise the poor to participate and contribute to the development of their cities.

They organised the poor to collect information on themselves and set up a movement of savings and credit, which built up the confidence of women pavement dwellers to begin to search for ways and to develop plans for alternative housing.

One of the strategies is to organise housing exhibitions of model houses designed and constructed by the poor themselves for the resettlement programs of urban slum areas. In several areas they have managed to convince the government to provide alternative land for slum dwellers to relocate their homes.

Sparc focuses on partner building strategies that have helped build bridges between the ppor and the government as well as social and financial institutions. SPARC advocates that the urban poor are a vital part of the city structure and that there can be no long term solution without involving their active participation.

A major focus of the work of SPARC is to include women ´s voices and women ´s leadership in the self organisation movements of the urban poor.

Allianza de Mujeres Costarricenses, Costa Rica (Monica Vega Zuniga)

Allianza de Mujeres is a 40 year old women ´s organisation fighting for the rights of women. It was formed in 1952 after the Costa Rican civil war. Professional and grassroots women train and teach each other to negotiate , both with their husbands and employers as well as with government officials to improve the situation of women. They bring attention to domestic violence and violence in the workplace and work toward more awareness of reproductive health issues including contraception.

Allianza de Mujeres believes that only when united and organised can women fight all forms of discrimination and violence, whether sexual, physical or mental. The Allianza fights for well paid work, for equal working conditions, for basic community services and for the recognition of domestic work. They advocate also for housing, education, health care, ccess to land and for land reform.

A strong focus of the Allianza is on the advancement of legal rights for women and on including women in decision making.

The women the Allianza organises come from diverse sectors of society. They are housewives, farmers, workers, professionals, mothers. They have 20 000 members, meeting in small groups all over the country to analyse from their own experience the problems that most women encounter and what they need to better their condition. In

monthly meetings strategies, objectives, results and accomplishments are evaluated, as a basis for further action.

The Association offers members legal assistance, psychological counselling, educational programs, newsletters, a documentation center and coordinated actions against discrimination.

In recent years, because of war and natural disasters the women of Costa Rica have been forced to become the primary family provider as well as homemaker. 7 out of 10 women are poor. They have been particularly hurt by the structural adjustment programs imposed on the country by international agencies.

Economic empowerment thus is another central area of concern and teaching women how to develop economic assets like the recycling of garbage or plastic bottles an important area of the Allianza's work.

Everest Foundation, Nepal

(Nira Sharma)

The work load for women in Nepal is much higher than the global average for women. A very small percentage is employed with regular wages, the dependency ration is high and life expectancy for women is less than for men, the only country in the world where this is the case.

The Everest Foundation focuses on economic empowerment of women, teaching women to use their own skills and indigenous knowledge to create economic activities like vegetable growing, goat raising or weaving to access own funds. They organise women in savings groups and offer literacy and skills trainings.

The Foundation has organised 867 members in 25 village groups.

The male members of the community begin to start realising the important role of women in contributing to family income, and treat them with more respect. Through the program migration and short term work outside the village has been reduced, also for the male members.

Over the years the women get active in village development and are involved in activities like building toilets, forest conservation or accessing safe water.

Almost all members of the programs have felt a visible change brought about by their involvement. Prior to the program the common view was that construction and renovation of infrastructure including basic services was the responsibility of government only. Now they see that they can initiate change on their own and create infrastructural improvements for their villages. The percentage of women able to read and write has increased about 20% and there is also a considerable increase of the number of girl children going to school. Access to credit for small loans has become possible and 34% of the women have initiated new enterprises with the support of the savings groups.

National Congress of Neighborhood Women (NCNW)

(Jan Peterson, Sandy Schilen, Liesl Burns)

The National Congress of Neighborhood Women is a network of racially diverse grassroots women leaders and community based organisations across the United States ranging from public housing resident associations to rural land trusts, working to sustain families and communities.

Formed in 1975 NCNW focuses on highlighting how low income women bring about positive change in rural and urban communities and are critical to community development. They feel that organising women on neighborhood level is essential to maintaining a quality of life for families and communities in the face of diminishing government support.

Goals include the self empowerment of women, enhancing women's leadership, honoring diversity, the preservation of neighborhoods, strengthening families in their many forms, introducing processes that foster dignity, mutual respect and trust, organising through support groups and networks, advocating for environmental concerns, supporting women's health and well being, holding governments accountable, and working in coalitions.

Member groups share common values and organising principles, including the commitment to:

- ✓ Encourage low-income women's leadership and participation in their communities
- ✓ Strengthen women's capacity by creating peer learning opportunities
- ✓ Increase opportunities for grassroots women to network locally, nationally and internationally for leadership support and global awareness
- ✓ Focus national attention on the capabilities and successes of low income women.

The NCNW facilitates dialogues among grassroots women's organisations to advocate the need that grassroots women's groups be embraced as full partners when formulating public policies and when implementing community development activities. NCNW has collected ample evidence that women's engagement in neighborhoods is wholistic and directed towards the growth of the whole community, that women care about sustainability, resist corruption and abuse and enhance the spirit and quality of neighborhoods.

WomanSpirit, St. Louis, USA

(LaDoris Payne)

WomanSpirit is a grassroots organisation located in St. Louis dedicated to the economic, social and spiritual empowerment of low-income African American communities in the Midwest. Founded in 1993 WomanSpirit is active in dismantling racism and other forms of oppression, in building economic self-sufficiency and literacy and in promoting alternatives to violence in their communities. Over the years and in partnership with the Ursuline Convent WomanSpirit has built up ownership of two houses in St. Louis, which they have created into a Living and Learning center, that functions as a community, a training and a conference center. It incorporates the Imani Business Incubator and Technology center, harboring a computer lab, and the Imani Mothers and Family Care Centre, offering health education and care giver support.

WomanSpirit perceives spirituality as a strength and basis for organising and development. It works through a method called „Circles of Hope“, a support group process that includes the elements of culture, spirituality, personal support, education and action and is a way to organise women across their life span, including seniors. Circles of Hope is an interactive process that engages people in their empowerment and leadership potential and reflects the values, concerns and priorities of those most affected by poverty. Circles of Hope supports the ability to be self directed, of creating self determined and self owned solutions, of making own decisions and acquiring resources for an adequate standard of living. It is a method for low income families and communities to discover the power that lies within them.

A focus of the work of WomanSpirit is „to help the poor get unpoor“ by learning how to manage the resources they have most effectively, learning how to put resources together in saving, peer lending and collective investing programs and by running micro enterprise programs for women to start small businesses.

Violence is a great concern in the communities where WomanSpirit works. Violence prevention trainings and support groups with women who have been victims of violence are therefor another major focus.

The Circles of Hope process is used in a wide variety of programs including cross cultural dialogues, principled partnerships, creation of community development corporations, housing, environmental businesses and leadership trainings.

Women´s Urban Safety Action Committee (CAFSU) in Montreal, Canada

(Michèle Chappaz)

The Women´s Urban safety Action Committee in Montreal (Comité action femmes et sécurité urbaine, CAFSU) began in 1992 and works to create a safer urban environment for women. It is a partners alliance comprised of 50% women´s community groups and 50% participants from local authorities like the municipality, the police department, public transport representatives, health and social service representatives. It now counts 15 members.

CAFSU works on strategies to increase women´s safety, autonomy and sense of security in the urban environment, to eliminate occasions of assault, to neutralise aggressors and to enhance men´s responsibility for their violence.

Innovations that have been created by CAFSU include:

- ✓ The „Between two Stops“ program, a service in which bus drivers let women off between stops at night, so that the walking distance to their homes is reduced
- ✓ New metro stations that are surrounded by glass and emergency telephones within easy reach for greater security in the metro system.
- ✓ Trainings for small businesses to be able to respond to a woman in danger including a pilot program in three neighborhoods where businesses encourage women to turn to them when harassed in the streets by carrying signs in their windows reading: „Here you are in good hands, your safety is important to us.“

An important part of the strategy of CAFSU involved gathering gender differentiated data on urban security, which made it clear that women are the biggest group using public transport and that women report fear at a much higher rate than men when moving in public spaces.

CAFU operates on the territory of the island of Montréal, a total of 1,8 million inhabitants, of which 52% are women. It is a permanent partnering structure for all issues regarding women's safety in the city. It's main accomplishment is to have created community responsibility for looking at and dealing with violence against women in the city.

Amica Prijateljice, Bosnia (Jasminca Tadic-Husanovic)

Amica Prijateljice works with some 400 displaced refugee women and 700 children in Tuzla, Bosnia Herzegovina. 90% of the women come from the Sebranizza area, where a massive genocide of the Bosnian male population took place during the war, under the eyes of UN soldiers, stationed there for the protection of the population. All of a sudden they became widows and self supporting mothers, often with three to four children. Prijateljice supports them to reconstruct their lives physically and psychologically under post-war conditions.

Amica was established in 1994 during the war. In the beginning the work was mainly related to the distribution of necessary food and non-food items. Meanwhile Amica has extended it's work to psycho-social work with traumatised women and children, educational and health services, income generating activities and the improvement of the democratic, social and legal situation in Bosnia and the preparation of refugees to return to their home communities.

The objective of Amica Prijateljice is to strengthen the position of women in society through counselling, education and employment as well as to support children in the development of their personality.

Income generating projects organised by Amica Prijateljice include sewing workshops and boutique, laundry services, childcare, gardening and hair cutting.

An important focus of Prijateljice is to protect women and children against violence, including the implementation of a law against domestic violence. Another is dealing with evictions. The group negotiates to find temporary homes for the women who lose their housing to inhabitants returning to their homes from abroad and helps them prepare for their own return to their native towns and villages.

Central to their work are the women's clubs where women can get information about all the questions they have about return, elections, pensions, privatisation, health issues and much more. The clubs are a secure place, where women can meet other women and can talk about all difficult moments such as violence in the family, evictions, missing persons, where they can cry together and laugh and get support. Relaxation sessions are offered as well as individual consultations and the women can forget for a while the manifold difficulties of their everyday lives.

Bantay Banay, Philippines

(Antonietta Rellin)

Bantay Banay or Family Watch is a community watch program in some 51 cities in the Philippines. Its goal is to alleviate, if not totally eliminate domestic violence and all violence against women. The goal of Bantay Banay is to mainstream violence against women from a personal to a public issue, to an issue of governance.

Aims of Bantay Banay include

- ✓ To enable women to develop the capability to respond to their own problems and in the process develop their own strength as persons
- ✓ To prevent and minimise the incidence of domestic violence and sexual abuse and other forms of violence against women
- ✓ To promote multi-sectoral and community approaches to domestic violence
- ✓ To mainstream the issue of violence against women and other gender issues into the program of government with corresponding budget, policy and logistical support.

Through its advocacy Bantay Banay has succeeded in establishing women's desks at police stations and special rooms at local hospitals to serve victims of violence. The group gives gender sensitivity trainings to doctors, police, churches, lawyers and government officials.

The group also works to prevent on-going violence by such activities as surrounding the house where a fight is taking place and making noise by throwing stones on the roof, banging bottles or spoons, until the violence stops. Thereby letting the perpetrator know that people are watching and discouraging further violence. Bantay Banay refers couples for mediation and assists the victim with temporary shelter and food. Bantay Banay also provides moral and practical support during litigation processes and mobilises members during court hearings.

The group began after a survey showed that 6 out of 10 women in Cebu City had been physically or sexually abused. Women had been organising and negotiating with the city government on health and land issues, but after the survey they realised that economic empowerment of women was not enough. Bantay Banay was formed.

Bantay Banay has raised public awareness on gender related issues, including resource allocation to women's programs and legal reforms affecting women. It has set up interagency councils in all major cities and has formed a nation wide network.. It is a strong lesson in gender mainstreaming and in the creation of sustainable partnerships between community women's group, mainstream institutions and local governments.

Self employed Women 's Union (SEWU), South Africa (Priscilla Maart)

SEWU began in 1994 inspired by the Self Employed Women 's Association (SEWA) in India. SEWU is a trade union of self-employed women based in Durban, South Africa serving nearly 3 000 women accross the country.

It has organised women accross positions in the informal economy, as street vendors, home based workers and agricultural workers to present their own needs. It 's aim is to represent the interest of self employed women engaged in the informal sector of the South African economy.

The goal of the Self Employed Women 's Union (SEWU) is to build unity between women whose work ' is not recognised by the society at large. The union helps women develop negotiating skills, so women can negotiate directly with authorities like the City Council, police, small contractors and middle men, as well as civic and political organisations. SWEU offers skills training and legal assistance and also assists women to solve such problems as child care, access to credit and sick and disability benefits. It helps them develop leadership skills and provides health advice and assistance.

Issues SEWU has taken up include negotiating for safe trading spaces for street vendors to sell and to store their goods. They negotiate for toilets street vendors can use as well as for their security in the streets and no harassment by the police. They have also negotiated for banks to be more willing to deal with low income clients from the informal sector and they assist members to get micro loans with regulations that are easy to compy with.

A main accomplishment of SEWU is that it has made the informal economy partnerable. It has developed the leadership skills of women who work outside of the formal work sector and enabled them to lobby to get laws and regulations changed that were not suitable to their needs.