

Chapter 10

Warsaw: Paving New Ways for Participation of Mothers, Fathers, and Children in Local Public and Social Life—The MaMa Foundation

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10.1 Introduction

Typically, activities falling into the category of civil activism arise from everyday problems and needs of individuals as well as groups. Those civic activities are therefore not profit oriented, but change oriented and often reflect existing gaps in social support system (Young 1999). One of the clear examples of this type of social initiative is MaMa Foundation, which emerged as an answer to unmet needs of mothers with small children. It is also one of the best examples of possible positive impact of local civil society organization (CSO) on public administration as well as local welfare policies.

MaMa Foundation's success story is even more telling in context of Polish low rates of CSOs' participation and declining belief in organizations such as trade unions, professional associations, and special interest associations now widespread in many European Union countries. As Eurobarometer data collected in 2013 shows, the share of respondents who reported that they did not need such organizations ranged between 23 % in Estonia and 55 % in Romania, with 43 % in Poland (Flash Eurobarometer 373 2013, p. 7). Generally, this opinion is stronger in the newer democracies.

However, it should be said that the participation in organizations is, in fact, only one of many forms of possible civic involvement. As Polish data shows, activities undertaken by individuals and informal groups have a significant role in this respect

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(CBOS 2011a). Also, both recent financial crisis and experiences gained through the implementation of different projects by CSOs and informal groups, strengthened the awareness of Polish society that working together with other people facilitates solving problems of their communities (neighbourhoods, villages, towns). Between 2002 and 2012, belief in the value of working together increased considerably, from 50 to 72 % (CBOS 2011b). Prevalence of this opinion can be considered as an important step forward in building social and cultural capital in Poland.

Frequently, joint activities start as an (informal) initiative on the part of individuals or groups, which are later transformed into formal CSOs for various reasons, for example, to be entitled to get financial support from public authorities or to have the formal status required to cooperate with public agencies. In Poland, people are more likely to participate in organizations having grassroots origins, initiated by individuals they know through their social network. This is due to the low level of citizens' trust in all kinds of public institutions and authorities (WVS 2012, unpublished), suspected of protecting only their own interests and not those of the citizens. MaMa Foundation, which was established by the group of young, highly educated mothers, is a good example of this trajectory. Stemming from an informal group of women experiencing similar life situation—having a small child and struggling to remain publicly active—this initiative transformed into highly innovative and influential CSO, giving voice to needs of both mothers and parents. Moreover, some of their projects become institutionalized, after local authorities decided to include them in their formal policies.

10.2 Warsaw As a Context of Innovation

The city of Warsaw is both the largest and most diverse in Poland, in terms of dynamic labour market, social problems as well as needs of its residents. In recent years, parents of young children become one of the most visible interests groups in the city, lobbying for new solutions in childcare or protesting against city regulations restricting the access to kindergartens and daycares.

Up to now, some chaos in implementation of the local social policy led to a situation when childcare needs were not sufficiently met by public system. For example, in 2012, in many districts in Warsaw, public daycares lacked over 6000 places (PAP 2012). This created the situation in which the residents “took the matter into their own hands” and came up with their own solutions to existing problems, often becoming animators of social innovation. For instance, problems with the institutional infrastructure related to childcare in Warsaw, particularly in the dynamically growing parts of the city, encouraged the inhabitants to develop civic initiatives in order to make the authorities engaged in new investments accountable for satisfactorily solving those issues. Also, civil society bodies were organizing new types of care facilities, to fill the existing gap in public services.

MaMa Foundation is a very successful example of this type of initiative, already serving as a role model to several similar grassroots' organizations in the city. The

Foundation has an integrative and innovative approach to tackling many problems connected with parenting in the big city, constantly developing new projects and ideas. The issues MaMa works with include city mobility of parents with small children, economic reactivation and social inclusion of women as well as problems connected with modern parenting.

The importance and visibility of those issues is growing in Warsaw, where, due to high in-migration levels and demographic change, the number of children at kindergarten age steadily increases. Predictions indicate that subsequent years will be those of a baby boom, which makes childcare policy of interest to politicians and parents. Also, the cultural shift expressed in higher life aspirations is changing parents' expectations and puts a new pressure on policymakers. It is especially visible in Warsaw, where number of young and highly educated professional men and women settle down, taking advantage of the good employment possibilities. This may explain the received publicity of MaMa Foundation since its first awareness campaigns. Media visibility was one of the important factors translating the Foundation postulates into political pressure that influenced decisions of the local authorities and administration in Warsaw.

10.3 The Foundation

MaMa Foundation is a non-profit organization established in Warsaw in June 2006 by a group of young, highly educated women, mothers of small children. Its activities are based on the idea that mothers and fathers with small children should be able to increase their participation in the local public and social life through elimination of social, cultural and architectonic barriers. The Foundation's ideas and projects are rooted in social economy, ideas of social solidarity and feminism. Currently, the MaMa Foundation not only addresses the needs of parents with small children living in Warsaw, but also supports refugees and disabled people. It lobbies on national and local level, working with public authorities and institutions, business, as well as media.

10.3.1 Types of Services and Ways of Addressing Users

Main types of MaMa Foundation's activities include social campaigns, free workshops and trainings, legal, psychological and civil advice, cultural, artistic and educational projects, as well as publishing and research initiatives focused on empowerment of women. Many of the listed activities take place in MaMa Café—a parents-friendly cafeteria located in the centre of Warsaw, rented on preferential terms from the local authorities.

One of the best-known Foundation's projects is "O Mamma Mia! I cannot drive my pram in here!". It is a social campaign for adapting public space for prams

and wheelchairs. It has been running since 2006 and includes systematic monitoring, taking into account specific needs of parents with small children and people with disabilities. Public places such as railway and metro stations, public offices, and transportation hubs are regularly evaluated. The results of the project include the publication of *Warsaw Friendly for Parents*—a handbook directed to local authorities and formulating standards, which should be met by parents- and children-friendly architecture and infrastructure. Other examples of similar awareness-raising projects are “Horror stories”—a campaign about mothers’ rights as employees; “Boys don’t pay”—a campaign emphasizing problems with fathers, who avoid paying alimony; a campaign focused on problems of pregnant women and lone mothers in urban space (including photo contests “Mum speaks now!” or “Bellybutton—hub of the universe”).

Also, MaMa Foundation voices concerns about the rights of women who do not work professionally but are stay-at-home mothers and wives. In recent years, two projects regarding this issue were implemented: “List of domestic tasks” and “Warsaw Housewives’ Club”. As for the first project, in cooperation with a group of experts, the organization has formulated recommendations for the Polish Parliament emphasizing the economic value of work performed by women at home: “We show and calculate it precisely that housework performed by women (...) is quantifiable and it is possible to calculate its precise value in money. (...) It is not all about paying women for doing housework, but about actually seeing this work, being able to notice it” (MaMa Foundation representative).

The project “Warsaw Housewives’ Club” included workshops aimed at increasing awareness of women in terms of partnership-based division of tasks at home and providing the participants with specific tools that could help them in negotiations with their husbands or partners.

The workshops, trainings and legal advice offered by MaMa Foundation address women getting back to work after maternal leave, mothers, who organize initiatives supporting other mothers, as well as female refugees and victims of domestic violence. Apart from that, since 2007, the Foundation inspired the establishment of local moms’ clubs in different Warsaw districts. They all provide free workshops for mothers, local leaders and representatives of local authorities and create friendly space for meetings and exchanging experiences. One such local moms’ club is located in one of the most deprived areas in Warsaw—Targówek district. When the club was closed due to the end of the project, the group of its former participants decided to set up their own independent organization called Mom’s Power Foundation, which, to some extent, continues the activities of the club by offering free services for parents from the district. This case shows how MaMa Foundation triggers other local initiatives and inspires similar projects all over Warsaw.

Another example of MaMa’s initiatives was the “Moms’ Cooperative” innovative training project, which was aimed at creating a new, independent social cooperative, giving employment to unemployed mothers. Its main goal was to support women who are threatened with social exclusion, in terms of their education, integration into the society and their future chances on the labour market. It included both vocational and psychological trainings in order to strengthen the overall

potential of unemployed women. The project included 10 young, lone mothers from Warsaw, who gave birth to their children before being 18 years old and were long-term unemployed (more than 2 years, usually because of childcare duties) (MaMa Cooperative 2011).

The specific activities within the project included educational workshops on social economy, social cooperatives, self-employment, marketing and promotion, folk art, and psychological motivations. In consequence, the participants set up Moms' Cooperative, which creates, promotes, and distributes regional and local handmade products inspired by Polish folk art (toys, jewellery, bags, cell-phones' accessories, souvenirs for tourists, and office supplies). Now, Moms' Cooperative operates independently from MaMa Foundation, trying to find place for its products on the local and national market. The idea of this project emerged from the cooperation between MaMa Foundation with two partners from the private sector: The Orbis Hotel Group and the Accor Foundation. The social cooperative of young and lone unemployed mothers from Warsaw is claimed to be the first initiative of this kind in Poland and serves as an example for other similar initiatives all over the country.

Other, cultural, artistic and educational projects run by MaMa Foundation include: "Baby at the cinema," organized in cooperation with cinemas in Warsaw, which enables parents to watch films while their children play with babysitters; "Mothers' Art"—the exhibition of modern art created by mothers; "MaMa Perform"—performative workshops for mothers; publishing books for adults (such as anthology "What does it mean to be a mother in Poland") and stories for children; workshops for children in the Warsaw Museum of Modern Art; as well as "Scientific Café"—meetings and discussions for parents with children.

10.3.2 Internal Organization and Modes of Working

All the people who currently manage MaMa Foundation (chair, members of the board and employees) are mothers and Warsaw residents, who personally experienced various problems related to being a mother in the capital. Foundation's chairwoman is Sylwia Chutnik, a known feminist, successful writer and certified guide to Warsaw. MaMa Foundation currently employs two people (temporarily, within the budgets of particular projects) and cooperates with about ten volunteers on a regular basis. The organization is also supported by a group of lawyers, psychologists, trainers, scientists and artists, who take part in its activities when needed. As a main rule of all MaMa programs, even when an initiative is directed only to adults, the Foundation allows the participation of children or provides free childcare during workshops, trainings or meetings.

The Foundation cooperates regularly with Warsaw authorities in order to develop mother- and child-friendly public spaces and policies. The members of Foundation's board, employees and experts participate in public debates and express in media their opinions on mothers' situation in private and professional life. Usually, the Foundation tries to spread its message among different social groups at the same

time: “The initiative is, in fact, aimed at several social groups. The women—this is the workshop part, the society as a whole—some of the social campaigns and the recommendations, aimed at politicians representing all options in the Parliament and the local authorities, not only politicians, but also officers of specific departments or offices” (MaMa Foundation representative).

MaMa Foundation cooperates with great variety of local and national entities, such as Association for Legal Intervention, various women’s organizations, Institute of Public Affairs (think-tank research organization), Warsaw Municipal Office, local authorities in several Warsaw’s districts, local politicians and public institutions such as Warsaw Labour Office. It also participates in several third sector coalitions, including women’s organizations as well as associations for the disabled.

Up to now, MaMa Foundation’s crucial projects were financed by: the Accor Foundation (private sector), Warsaw Labour Office (public sector), Trust for Civil Society for Central and Eastern Europe (public charity incorporated under the laws of the USA), and European Social Fund. Apart from that, the Foundation has the status of a Public Benefit Organization, which means that, according to Polish law, it is allowed to receive 1 % of income tax from individuals. To receive such status, an organization has to be a foundation or association (political parties and trade unions do not qualify), involved in specific activities related to public benefit as described by the law, and being sufficiently transparent in its activities, governance and finances.

10.3.3 Embeddedness in the Local Welfare System

MaMa Foundation’s initiatives strongly affected local public discourse on mothers and fathers with small children, defining them as a group with particular needs and problems, especially regarding the participation in public life and city space mobility. The Foundation contributed significantly to a growing awareness of public officials on the importance of mother and child-friendly architecture and infrastructure. None of those issues were seriously addressed in Warsaw before.

MaMa Foundation stresses also the important issue of reconciliation of work and care by emphasizing that motherhood does not have to be an obstacle to personal and professional development of women. Apart from that, the Foundation offers solutions in terms of employment and childcare, which are innovative and alternative to those provided by public institutions. For example, Moms’ Cooperative concerns such specific subgroup as long-term unemployed mothers by using innovative means based on the concepts of social economy.

Through its lobbying activities, MaMa Foundation challenges the common belief that women on maternal leave are satisfied to spend time with their children at home, in local shops and on playgrounds. They argue that this type of social and spatial isolation of young mothers often results in their sense of loneliness and depression. Regarding these problems, MaMa Foundation established several “Local Moms’ Clubs” in different parts of Warsaw, where mothers can come with their children, meet with other people, exchange experiences and take part in free workshops

and trainings. Apart from that, the Foundation provides great variety of cultural and educational activities, which are directed to women or parents with children.

The activities of MaMa Foundation are followed with interest by organizations and institutions in other Polish cities as well as abroad. The project “Warsaw Housewives’ Club” is being implemented in Berlin, and a female representative of the Ukrainian Parliament has also displayed some interest in establishing similar projects in her country. Last but not least, the projects of MaMa Foundation trigger, intentionally or spontaneously, multiplication of local initiatives, which are often implemented by MaMa’s actions beneficiaries, strengthening potential of local communities to solve their own problems.

10.4 Conclusions

MaMa Foundation is an innovative initiative established by a group of highly educated young women, who continue identifying new problems important for women and families living in the city. The organization fits perfectly the Dalton’s broader description of reactions of societies living in contemporary democratic systems. As Dalton wrote: “People today are also more conscious of their political rights and more demanding in their individualism. The new style of citizens’ politics encourages a diversity of political interests (issue publics), instrumental and flexible voting choices, and more direct styles of political action (...) This interest groups signify a new way of organizing interests and mobilizing opinion.” (2002, pp. 253–254)

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