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EVROPSKÁ KONTAKTNÍ SKUPINA V ČESKÉ
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Evropská kontaktní skupina v České republice

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Foreword

The restoration of democracy and civil society in the Central and East European countries, which came after the fall of “the iron curtain” in the year 1989, has been a very slow and complicated process. People slowly started to engage themselves after several decades of lethargy caused by totalitarian regimes. There was also lots of enthusiasm at the beginning and many people believed it would take only few years till we catch up the rest of Europe. The other part of Europe thought the same. However both sides had to learn to be patient.

The economic restructuring and transit from the centrally planned economies to the free market, which came alongside with the process of re-involvement of the civil society, brought about serious economic problems into the region. Many state industries and non-functioning enterprises as well as plenty of state farms collapsed and had to be closed down. Unemployment as a new phenomenon turned up and thousands of people lost their jobs. It was a new situation because employees were used to having several certainties during the communist times and a job was one of them. Therefore this new development was very shocking for most of them.

Women became one of the most vulnerable groups on the labour market. They face higher percentage of unemployment than men, long term unemployment, gender pay gap, discrimination when seeking a job, gender stereotypes etc. The only group of women, which is of a demand, are young, experienced, high educated and childless women. All the other groups are less “attractive” and very often discriminated for having small children, having no practical experience, being of a higher age, having a lower education etc.

As there is a low awareness about those issues in the Czech society even among women themselves we have chosen it as our main theme of work.

The decent and equal life of women who form over a half of the population in the Czech Republic will positively influence development of the family life, local communities, and therefore the whole society. The more equality the higher social and political culture of the countries as well as stronger democracy. We believe that this is a key issue to the sustainable and effective development of the Czech Republic and a whole East European community.

About the organisation

Evropská Kontaktní Skupina v České republice (EKS) is a nongovernmental organisation, which is engaged with the issues of working life, structural transformation in CEE region after the political changes, unemployment as a new phenomenon in the region, social exclusion and work related discrimination. The priority of EKS work is women and their position on the labour market. We deal with the issues of women unemployment, work related discrimination operating in the Czech Republic and CEE, working conditions of women workers, industrial work from home as a growing part of the informal workforce, women in precarious work as well as equal opportunities for man and women in general. EKS is the only organisations in the Czech Republic, which is focused specifically on the issues of precarious women labour. One of the main issues with which we are engaged is homebased work of women in the context of the whole CEE region. The research on homebased work we carry on is the pioneering activity in the Czech Republic. Until recently it was just a marginal issue in the whole region. EKS also promotes networking among women's organisations, state bodies and trade unions in the Czech Rep. and links them to international networks and activities. Networking with other partners appears to be a very needed and welcomed initiative among Czech organisations.

History

The EKS was established in September 2002 as a co-operative body of the wider international network called the European Contact Group – ECG (which exists since late 60's). It gathers grassroots and local groups, NGO's as well as individuals from 26 European countries, which work on the issues of work, women, social issues, migration and discrimination. Members of the network work together towards building sustainable society. They organise campaigns, workshops, seminars and training in order to share and develop new strategies to improve the precarious situations of many disadvantaged groups of people in Europe. In the last two years the ECG has been developing various projects and promoting networking and cooperation between West and East in the region of the Central and Eastern Europe. Most of the projects were connected to the EU enlargement and economic and social transformation, globalisation, unemployment, development of the civil society and women requalification.

The amount of projects as well as the number of the partners has gradually grown up and at that point we have decided to create an independent organisation, which would coordinate and run all the activities in the CEE region and also function as the wider network's local branch. That is how the EKS was established.

Our aims

- Build and develop civic society, improve the current unsatisfactory situation of women who face difficulties caused by socio-economic changes in the Czech Republic and other CEE countries.
- Empower women and their families to be able to resolve their problems as well as improve their working and living conditions.
- Support networking between Czech women's organisations, activists as well as individuals and international partners.
- Support building local communities as well as sharing and networking as an effective way of development.
- Raise awareness on the issues of women labour and discrimination in the Czech Republic.
- Combat racism and discrimination.

Our main activities

- Organising workshops and seminars on the issues of informal women's work, women's unemployment & discrimination, migrant women, social exclusion.
- Organizing trainings and international exchanges for social activists, grassroots groups' leaders & NGO workers from the Czech Republic and the countries of Central and Eastern Europe.
- Networking, sharing know-how, knowledge & experience on social and economic issues in the Czech Republic and Central and Eastern Europe linked to West European partners.
- Campaigning and advocacy on the issues of women's work and equal opportunities between men and women

Our structure

The governing body of EKS is the General Assembly, which consists of all the members of the association (15) and has the decisive authority in most of the matters. The executive body is the Committee. It is elected by the General Assembly and has three members – one chair and two deputy-chairs. The chair is the main “political representative” of the organisation. The assembly also elects the Revision Committee amongst its members with the main task to control the finances of the organisation. The Revision Committee consists of two members. EKS has two paid members of the staff – communication & information worker and women's issues worker.

The founders of the EKS are:

Mgr. Eva Kavkova worked for the international ECG network as a specialist on the issues of unemployment and social exclusion and she has become the chair of the EKS. She carries on working on the same issues with the main focus on the CEE region.

Mgr. Ivana Sindlerova is the EKS women's project coordinator and the deputy chair.

Mgr. Tomas Tozicka was the founder and the director of the SESAM (Centre for Economic and Social Activities) in Most. The centre was developing and promoting local economic and social activities, supporting development of the civil society and community development in the region of Most and also helping people – both individuals and groups to overcome their life difficulties in the region with one of the highest unemployment rates in the Czech Republic. The centre was also running an asylum house for women. Tomas Tozicka works nowadays as a leader of the Neruda centre project, which is focused on development help and education and he's also the director of the revision committee of the Czech development NGO platform.

ThDr. Jiri Silny is the director of the Ecumenical Academy in Prague. This organisation is specialised in adult education and Czech – German – Polish relations and cultural and political exchanges. The Academy has also participated on the projects concerning women trafficking in Europe.

Tony Addy has been working as a programme development secretary of the European Contact Group for 13 years. He is specialised in the issues of EU enlargement, economic and social transition and transformation in the CEE countries and Globalisation. He is also one of the founders of the project that supports the rights of the home-based workers. This programme has started in the UK, but nowadays it has spread to many European countries including the Czech Republic.

Projects and activities realised in the year 2002

I.PROJECTS

1. Homeworking project

This project has been developed with the help and support of the HomeNet International, an NGO based in Leeds, UK. The aim was to support women homebased workers and promote their rights as workers.

The project was divided into two phases. The first one was called “the mapping”. It was an action research, which aimed to find out whether there are any homebased workers in the Czech Republic and what are their working and living conditions. The main questions were: if they have at least the minimal salary, how long and how much they have to work to earn money for living, what are their health and safety working conditions, whether they have a proper contract, whether they have social and health insurance, why they do this kind of work, do they have any other income, what is their family situation, are there any family members that depend on their income, what sort of work they do etc.

The second stage is meant to encourage homebased workers to reflect on their situation, encourage them to form groups and stand up for their right as workers. The information campaign on the issue based on the findings from the research is supposed to be launched.

Apart from the Czech Republic the project is running in other European countries - in Lithuania, Serbia, Estonia, Slovakia, Bulgaria, Romania, UK and Netherlands with the aim to launch the whole European campaign, advocacy and lobbying.

So-called homework – or the industrial work from home –was something completely unknown in the Czech Republic. No research had been made so far and no one had known if there were any workers who would fit into this category. Therefore we had to start from the very beginning.

The first period we spent mainly by getting into the problem and gathering information and contacts concerning the topic on national as well as international level (ILO conventions on the issues of informal sector, core labour standards, Clean Clothes campaign materials, HomeNet info, IFWEA activities, EU info, statistics in CZ...). After those initial steps we organised the work into two coherent levels:

- A. Investigation within the Czech Republic.
- B. Cooperation and exchange of information and strategies internationally.

A. Activities in the Czech Republic

We have started building contacts within the Czech NGO’s involved in women and gender issues, churches, requalification centres, labour offices and trade unions. Thanks to those as well as personal contacts we gradually found the first homebased workers and established meetings with them.



The initial idea was to start seeking in the area of the Northern Bohemia (the coal mining area of the highest unemployment of 22%). We thought that there is going to be a large concentration of homebased workers due to precarious situation on the labour market. It appeared to be a wrong assumption. We found just few people with a short experience with homebased work. The

reason seems to be that homebased work is mostly concentrated in areas of light industry as it is a part of the process of production of goods. Furthermore there is so many unemployed in the area that it is demotivating to work for a low salary when people can live on social benefits.

The homeworkers we found so far are living in different parts of the country. Most of them work for jewellery factories concentrated in the North of the country and distributing work all over the state. They assemble necklaces, rosaries and brooches. Most of them do it just for the financial support, not as the main income activity. They are either unemployed or on social benefits for health reasons or on maternity leave. The money they earn is small but initial for coverage of the basic expenses. They have no contracts and therefore no security. The work comes through intermediaries and therefore it is irregular.

The other industry is Christmas decoration making and decorating. Women decorate Christmas glass balls using various chemicals and glues. Most of those women have been working for the factories for a long time and had standard contracts. We have also met women doing handicrafts and babies accessories for foreign companies. The working conditions of most of them are precarious as we have expected.

We will continue the research in the next year to get a more precise picture about the homebased work in the Czech Republic. Our big task is to find and identify subcontractors' chains in our country (with the help of our international partners). We will inform appropriate institutions (Trade Unions, Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, ...) about our findings and publish information about the topic.

B. International activities

As a part of the project we participated in several seminars and also made a study visit. Some of them have taken place before the EKS has been established, because it was part of the preparatory phase:

- **HomeNet International seminar** on the new phenomenon in Eastern Europe-homebased work (with UK as a model country), Sofia, Bulgaria, March 2002
- **Decent working conditions for informal economy workers** - Soesterberg, Netherlands, April 2002
- **HomeNet International training seminar** on strategies for work with homebased workers-Leeds, UK, June 2002
- **Labour issues and globalisation**, the international seminar organised by Trialog, Vienna, Austria, November 2002



We have organised a study visit to Lithuania to find out what is the situation of the homebased workers in this country. We have shared our findings and experience with the Lithuanian colleagues working with homebased workers and prepared strategy for the future cooperation in this field including further mutual visits and the training seminar on the issues.

2. Creating and developing the Czech and CEE Network

This project aims to create and develop network of organisations working on the issues of women & labour market & discrimination in the Central and Eastern Europe and link them with the Czech organisations as well as Western Europe..

Firstly we have collected all the relevant data on the situation of women in the Czech Republic and other CEE countries and made comparisons with the EU standards and reality. As for the research in the Czech Republic we used the official sources as well as information from experienced NGO workers e.g. The Academy of Science in CZ, The Czech Statistical Office, The Union of Czech Women, The Helsinki Committee, the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, Trade Unions, RIC – Requalification and Information Centre in Most, the requalification centre Most k životu an others.

Thanks to the active contact building and the great interest of the Czech women's organisations we started the networking very soon.

We were linking women organisations from the Czech Republic with other East and West European activist. We were sending them information on upcoming events, which we gathered from the Internet or received from various European organisations. We created and sent out a regular e-news, which informed on interesting projects and happenings. We helped our partners with building new specific international contacts on the issues they were interested in as well as fundraising. We have supported different exchanges between people in the Czech Republic, Poland, Estonia, Lithuania and Latvia. What is the most important: we have met a great interest in this project and our network is successfully growing.

In order to learn more as well as promote the issue of work-related discrimination as well as our activities we participated in related events organised by the Czech NGO's.

- **Women of small cities and villages** - Kostelec, Czech Republic, September 2002 (Union of Catholic Women)
- **Village women** -Benešov, Czech Republic, November 2002 (The Union of Czech Women)
- **Seminar on discrimination on the labour market** in Czech Republic, Prague, Czech Republic, December 2002 (Helsinki Committee CZ)
- **Seminar on discrimination on the labour market** in Czech Republic organised by Helsinki Committee CZ, Prague, Czech Republic, December 2002

II. PUBLISHING

As a part of our information strategy we published following articles:

- ***What is a life of homeworkers in the Czech Republic about?*** published in an internet server FEMINISMUS.cz (mostly read by students, intellectuals, educated women)
- ***Shall we work on maternity leave?*** published in an internet server devoted to women on maternity leave MIMINKA.cz (the article was followed by a questionnaire on the financial situation of young mothers and a need of an extra income). Results of the survey confirmed that women on maternity leave do work informally to increase their small income.
- ***Women on the labour market – women in insecurity*** published in a magazine of Union of Catholic Women called BABYKA.
- ***Do you know what the life of homeworkers is like?*** published in a magazines of catholic and protestant church in Most.

III. CO-OPERATIONS WITH INTERNATIONAL PARTERS

1. Black & Migrant women's meeting

We are part of an international team (the other colleagues are from Belgium, France, Finland, Netherlands and Estonia), which is organising biannual meetings for migrant women in Europe in order to empower them and give them support. Such a gathering enables the women to meet and share their stories and experience, not only among themselves, but with other women from the major society. It directly empowers women and support their self-esteem and self-confidence. It is also used as an opportunity for advocacy and lobbying as different politicians are being invited to join the meetings. Moreover, many informal networks of women are being established out of this project. The collected stories are published as another tool for campaigning and fighting racism and discrimination.

The previous meetings took place in Antwerp, Belgium in 1998 and in Glay, France in 2001. The next meeting will take place in Finland and EKS participated in development and initial preparations.



2. Biannual Women's meeting

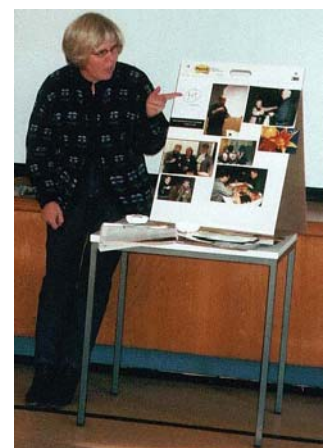
The European Contact Group organises biannual meetings of different women's projects, which are connected in its network. EKS workers prepared and organized the meeting in 2001 in Most, Czech Republic, on the issues of homeworking, requalification and migrants & minorities. This was the actual starting point of the EKS based on voluntary work, although the organisation itself was officially founded one year later. During this year we were working on the follow up and planning of the next meeting, which would take place in Norfolk, UK in September 2003. The main issues are: migrant women in the small towns, women and unemployment in marginalized areas and women and empowerment. So far we have organised the venue of the meeting, visits to local projects and we are developing the programme of the meeting.



3. Good Work

The Good Work project is promoting a new debate on labour with a focus on emphasizing its quality and values and relation between work and time, work and environment, work and family. The project is stimulating public discussion, reflection and follow up action on these issues and in these environments:

- at school, with children or students
- in factories, with workers, trade unionists and employers
- in parishes and ecumenical groups
- in the street and market place, with those who are passing by
- with the local, national and international policy makers and in relevant conferences and fora



- within the EU and ILO debate on quality in work & decent work.

We have attended the Good Work seminar, which took place in Finland, Sipoo in September 2002 in order to find more about the strategy that was carried out by the Finnish Church and society commission of the Helsinki parishes and the SAK (The Central Organisation of Finnish Trade Unions) on the issue of balance between family and working life. The meeting was very valuable and we established many new contacts interested in the future co-operation.

IV. The partnership with Ecumenical Academy Prague

Ecumenical Academy in Prague has become our closest partner since the establishment of our organisation. We have joined their project called **Budanka pro budoucnost**. The aim of the project is to renew the old workers colony Budanka in Prague 5, which was built in 19th century and to open there an educational, ecological and social centre. It will be used for organising educational and cultural activities for the people from neighbourhood, Prague citizens and all the activists and NGO members from the whole Czech Republic. There will also be the office space for couple of them, mainly for the Budanka coalition members. The centre will be also connected to wider European networks and international cooperation. So far the project has been promoted among the Municipality of Prague 5. Ecumenical Academy with this project seems to be the only organisation, which is seriously considered as a possible owner of the venue.



Conclusion

The year 2002 has been very successful for our organisation. Since our establishment we have initiated two pioneering projects, which aroused a great deal of interest. We started to build a new network and created strong connections with active networks and organisations in other countries. We have also involved other Czech NGOs and activists.