

Cooperative builds a women's economy



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 Navigation towards Independence - Gründerinnenzentrale (Women's Start-up Centre)
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In brief

Gründerinnenzentrale – Navigation in die Selbständigkeit was set up in 2006 in Berlin in order to strengthen networking among women who want to set up their own businesses, women entrepreneurs and business experts. Gründerinnenzentrale is a contact point for female business starters and every woman, who thinks about it, a project of the association WeiberWirtschaft e.V. and supported by ESF, Berlin Senat and the cooperative WeiberWirtschaft e.G. , where Gründerinnenzentrale is located. The Gründerinnenzentrale has built up a very good reputation. More than 10,000 women have made contact, 3,700 have attended meetings, and the website receives 30,000 visits a year. Around 80% of women who contact the centre go on to set up their own businesses.

WeiberWirtschaft eG is Europe's largest women's cooperative and Businesscenter which was founded in 1989 by 17 university graduates and now has 1,750 members.

It operates a 7,100 square metre business centre which provides workspace for some 65 women running businesses in the service, manufacturing, crafts, gastronomy, culture, education and non-profit areas. They benefit from a nursery, mentoring, monthly networking meetings, seminars and workshops, a cafeteria and meeting rooms. The building also contains 13 social housing units. The €18.6 million ecological renovation of the building, in central Berlin, was financed through subscriptions from WeiberWirtschaft's members, support from Berlin's urban regeneration budget, and bank loans. No current public funding! WeiberWirtschaft is a company and gains revenue only from letting commercial spaces. The centres principle is to support gender equality in the social life and employment through a better labour market integration and respect of diversity through tailored services for different women groups. This is in line with the policy priorities of the Senat for Work, Integration and Women of Berlin, that aims to support the equality of women and men in the labour market and improvement of the reconciliation of work and family life, including the provision of adequate training opportunities.

More women entrepreneurs are needed

The German business landscape is attracting more and more women all the time. Yet women's potentially huge entrepreneurial contribution is far from being fully tapped and most enterprises founded by women are in typically female sectors, such as in the service sector, while in technology oriented start-ups the share of women is only about 10%-15%. In this light, specific measures to support women entrepreneurs have been taken. The Bundesweite Gründerinnenagentur (BGA – National Agency for Women's Start-up Activities and Services), which is sponsored by the Federal Ministry for Education and Research, the Federal Ministry for Family, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth and the Federal Ministry of Economy and Technology, represents a first step towards increasing the number of businesses started by women. The agency's Germany-wide hotline for female business owners advises and facilitates contact to women experts and gives information on coaching opportunities throughout the country. In addition, the agency collates gender-specific data regarding starting a company, which is then made available to the general public.

Turning unemployment into self-employment has become a major focus of German active labour market policy since 2005. The Hartz reforms (I-IV) of 2003-2005 introduced a new business start-up subsidy scheme in 2006, which provided financial support for unemployed people in the initial start-up phase (up to €300 monthly on top of unemployment benefit). In order to facilitate micro and small business the Federal Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs (BMA), the Federal Ministry of Economics and Technology (BMWV) and KfW launched the German Microfinance Fund in 2010 to provide easier access to capital. Women have an especially need for small loans, and the proportion of women borrowing small sums has reached 33%, but is expected to increase to 40%.

Europe's largest women's cooperative and Businesscenter

Thanks to the strong commitment of the members of the WeiberWirtschaft cooperative, the initiative has had a wide impact and long-term effects by creating a physical place where intending and actual woman entrepreneurs can network with others, make contact with the cooperative-wide network and obtain services and information. The centre is a great example of the way a network can be open to the outside world and thus improve its capacity to foster change and share learning, skills and knowledge. It has already received several awards: in 2011 it won the Innovation Award of the Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD), in 2008 the Prize of the Regions of the Congress of the Council of Europe, in 2007 the Most Family-Friendly Enterprise in Berlin-Mitte, in 2006 one of 365 award-winning locations in the Germany – Land of Ideas campaign and in 2005 the Berlin State Award in the Mutmacher der Nation ('Local Heroes') contest.

The WeiberWirtschaft cooperative invested €18.6 million in renovating the site prior to the centre's launch. Business subsidies and a loan from the Berlin urban renewal programme helped in financing The Gründerinnenzentrale (Women's Start-up Centre), but a large part had to be financed through bank loans. Year by year the women in the co-operative have been paying off the debt, helped by the support of new members, very low running costs due to ecological refurbishment (the centre generates its own solar energy). Progress is marked by the ceremonial naming of repaid portions, room by room, after a patroness or celebrated woman. Since its inception in 1989, over 1,750 women have subscribed to the inspiring idea of a self-reliant women's start-up and business centre by buying shares in the cooperative (each share costs €103). Over the years the centre has built up a very positive public image. Its success has been built on the back of the knowledge, experience and commitment of the cooperative's members, who contribute to its sustainability and efficiency. This allows a high level of know-how transfer, exchanges with other entrepreneurs and extended possibilities to co-operate. The main lesson is thus one of cooperative values: what would never have been achieved by one woman alone has been made possible through the motivation of many women collectively.

Contacts/Further Information

Contacts

Contact Cooperative WeiberWirtschaft:

Dr. Katja von der Bey

WeiberWirtschaft eG

Anklamer Straße 38

10115 Berlin

katja.vdbey@weiberwirtschaft.de

Contact Gründerinnenzentrale:

Antje Ripking

Gründerinnenzentrale in der WeiberWirtschaft

Anklamer Straße 39/40

10115 Berlin

Germany

Tel +49 30-44 02 23 45

ripking@gruenderinnenzentrale.de

Further information

WeiberWirtschaft - website



Brochure



Gründerinnenzentrale - website



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