



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

Germany

2006-2014

Cooperative builds a women's economy

Summary

The Gründerinnenzentrale (Women's Start-up Centre) 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. It was opened as a subsidiary of WeiberWirtschaft, Europe's largest women's cooperative, which was founded in 1989 by 17 unemployed 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. Peer support is provided through 'success teams', group of 4-6 women who motivate and support each other. 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.

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.

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 Gründerinnen-agentur (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 (BMWi) 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%.

Within this context, The Gründerinnenzentrale (Women's Start-up Centre) was set up in 2006 in Berlin to intensify networking among women who want to set up their own businesses, existing women entrepreneurs and business experts. It was opened as a subsidiary of WeiberWirtschaft (Women's Economy), Europe's largest women's cooperative, which was founded in 1989 by 17 unemployed university graduates and now has 1,750 members.

Accent on networking

The centre supports gender equality in social life and employment through better labour market integration and respect for diversity by offering tailored services for women. This is in line with the policy priorities of the Berlin Senate for Work, Integration and Women, which support the equality of women and men in the labour market and the better reconciliation of work and family life, including the provision of adequate networking opportunities. Moreover, the centre's motto – "make women economically strong!" – is perfectly in line with the aims of the Europe 2020 strategy and the Strategy for Equality between Women and Men 2010-2015 to make women economically independent.



The centre offers 7,100 square metres of workspace, and hosts around 65 women-run companies from the service, manufacturing, crafts, gastronomy, culture, education and non-profit areas as well as 13 social housing units. The infrastructure includes a day-care centre, a cafeteria and a meeting area. Low-cost kindergarten places for children aged from 10 months to six years are guaranteed for every mother who rents space.

Through its networking activities and access to direct communication channels, the centre is able to assist women wanting to set up a business by providing comprehensive start-up and business management support.

Networking opportunities are implemented through various direct and indirect channels:

1. **Networking** for information and business exchange provided through a number of events, especially the *Stammtisch* meeting, where entrepreneurs and start-up initiatives can meet up and exchange experience. Every first Thursday of the month, women can easily and casually socialise with other women entrepreneurs operating in many market sectors and meet potential partners. In addition, cooperative members give information on economic opportunities. The network meeting is free and registration is not required.
2. **Seminars and information evenings** among women entrepreneurs and women who want to become entrepreneurs provide general information on questions related to running an



enterprise, being self-employed or working as freelance, such as accounting, management and pricing.

3. Regular **workshops** organised by WeiberWirtschaft cooperative members.
4. **Success teams** which consist of 4-6 women entrepreneurs who motivate and support each other in the establishment and management of an enterprise. Regular team meetings and a clear structure help the participants to achieve their own goals.
5. The **Push up mentoring programme** in which individual mentors support women in the initial start-up phase.
6. The centre also provides a **list of contacts** of advisers and organisations that can give further and more specialised support. Support is also given in finding a location or a business partner.
7. The **website** gives information on issues relevant to female entrepreneurs and gives access to entrepreneurs' databases.
8. The **newsletter** includes a calendar of activities and networking events related to the start-up of a business.
9. **Information material** is downloadable from the website free of charge.
10. Free **workspaces** are provided, where women can write their business plan or search for information.

Services are provided by professional experts and by members of the WeiberWirtschaft cooperative.

Europe's largest women's cooperative

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. Additional financial resources to the The Gründerinnenzentrale (Women's Start-up Centre) come from ESF operational programme for Berlin which pays specific attention to women's entrepreneurship.

Since its inception in 1989, over 10,000 women have contacted the centre and 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). Its meetings have been attended by more than 3,700 women and the website is visited more than 30,000 times a year.



According to an evaluation, over 80% of women continue with their idea of setting up a business after their first contact or seminar attendance. About 50% have launched their business after six months, about 25% are still in process of doing so and 15% give up on their idea. There is a high satisfaction with the services offered, and only 3% are dissatisfied.

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.

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Website: <http://www.gruenderinnenzentrale.de/en/startpage/>

Brochure:
http://www.weiberwirtschaft.de/fileadmin/user_data/pdf/informieren/WeiberWirtschaft_english_2013.pdf

Portraits of successful entrepreneurs: <http://www.gruenderinnenzentrale.de/gruenderinnen-portraits/>

Presentation video: <http://www.gruenderinnenzentrale.de/en/presseinformation/>

WeiberWirtschaft: www.weiberwirtschaft.de