

## **Make Mothers Matter**

Under the High Patronage of His Majesty King Mohammed VI  
International Conference Mothers4Peace  
Casablanca, Morocco

# Pathways for Peace

## The Transformative Role of Mothers in Building Peace at Home

By Rima Salah, PhD



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## **Pathways to Peace: The Transformative Role of Mothers in Building Peace at Home**

*By Rima Salah, Ph.D.*

*Yale Child Study Center*

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**I**t gives me great pleasure to participate in this very important and timely international conference “Mothers4Peace” and in this very beautiful and historic city – Casablanca. I wish to express my gratitude to Madam Anne Claire de Liedekerke, President of “Make Mothers Matter,” for honoring me with her invitation.

It is also the place and time to pay tribute to “Make Mothers Matter,” one of the oldest international organizations devoted to the cause of mothers, raising their voices wherever they are for participation and social justice.

I am privileged to have the opportunity to talk to you on “Pathways for Peace: The Transformative Role of Mothers in Building Peace at Home,” emphasizing the role of mothers in changing the tide of violence and creating a culture of peace at home and in the community, through the lens of early childhood development.

In November 2019, the international community will celebrate the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Convention on the Rights of the Child. On this occasion we can rightly celebrate the impressive gains achieved for the children of the world. According to UNICEF, more children than ever before are surviving past their fifth birthday. More are receiving vaccinations against diseases. More are benefiting from access to quality education (boys and girls), sanitation, water, and nutrition.

But progress has been only true for some, leaving millions of children behind, and their rights denied to thrive and grow to their full potential, reinforcing social inequity for the children of the world.

According to the series on “Advancing early childhood development: From science to scale” that was recently published in *The Lancet* (2017), the world’s oldest and best known medical journal, we know that, unfortunately, an estimated 250 million children under five years of age in low and middle-income countries and in emerging economies will face inequalities and fail to reach their full development potential. This is because they grow up with a broad range of risk factors that include poverty, poor health, abuse, neglect and exploitation, as well as inadequate care and learning opportunities.

This is compounded by the situation of migration, war and conflict and extreme violence to which families and parents/mothers are exposed.

Every year, hundreds of millions of children are exposed to and are victims of domestic violence, many of them exposed at an early age. According to a UNICEF report, close to 300 million (3 in 4) children aged 2 to 4 worldwide experience violent discipline by their caregivers on a regular basis, and 250 million children (around 6 in 10) are punished by physical means.

Also, as revealed by a new report by Save the Children, more children than ever before, at least 357 million globally, are now living in

areas affected by conflict. Nearly half of these children are in areas affected by high intensity conflict where they could be vulnerable to the United Nation's six grave violations: killing and maiming, recruitment and use of children, sexual violence, abduction, attacks on schools and hospitals, and denial of humanitarian assistance.

More than that, according to a UNICEF publication in 2016, "Uprooted: The Growing Crisis for Refugee and Migrant Children," 50 million children have migrated across borders or have been forcibly displaced, and a shocking 28 million have been uprooted by horrific violence. We know that conflict, violence and displacement can disrupt the fabric of societies, communities and families, and compromise the very foundation of their institutions.

The vulnerability of the family is further exacerbated by the separation of its different members, and the erosion of destruction of all protective systems. In the absence of protective systems, it is the family, the parents/mothers that emerge to build a protective environment for their children. But the exposure of parents/mothers to instability and stress challenge their ability to provide for their children protection and nurturing care that they need.

Many refugee Syrian mothers interviewed in Lebanon, Jordan and Turkey expressed their alarm about how their children lives have changed and the emotional distress they have suffered... Some found that their

children were growing up fast: that they had seen too much, and taken too much on their shoulders. This made mothers feel helpless but still resilient, and want to exert all efforts to protect their children.

Yes, it is the story of lost childhood, but what is more alarming and should concern us all is the lasting negative impact of deprivation, violence (physical and structural) and displacement on young children and its detrimental effect on their development.

Advances in developmental neuroscience are causing a revolutionary shift in the way we think about child development, as we learn about the impact of both positive and negative experiences – and the interplay of experiences and genetics on the developing brain. We now realize that in the first year of life, the brain grows at pace of 700-1000 new neural connections per second, a pace that is never achieved again. By age 3, a child's brain is twice as active as an adult's brain. It is early life experiences from preconception onward that determine the capacity of the brain – its structure and function, and has direct influence on the physical health of the child.

While an individual's genetic endowment is fundamental, parenting provides a legacy that transcends our genes. How a child is nurtured and cared for early in life has a direct impact on brain structure and function.

This new knowledge holds significant implications for the future of millions of children living in fragile contexts worldwide, as well as on our

thinking about creating a culture of peace and about sustaining peace in the world. It heralds in a new era with windows of opportunities to contribute to sustainable peace through investment in the positive early development of young children.

It further highlights the importance of positive parenting and reinforces the evidence that by stimulation, caregiving, attachment, bonding and creating safe contexts for children, all have positive influence on their brain development and can help children grow, learn and thrive.

In addition, emerging and well established scientific evidence from multiple disciplines (psychology, sociology, epigenetics, economics) continues to substantiate the link between early years and early life environment with long-term wellbeing, violence prevention and behaviors linked with more peaceful families and communities. The formative years of life and intra- and inter-family and community relationships are powerful agents of change that can promote resilience, social cohesion and peace.

In these critical times, unfortunately, there is insufficient investment in the early years of life as a path to peace at home, in the community, and in society, and as a path to social transformation and violence prevention. Also, the peacebuilding, peacemaking discourse failed to be inclusive and acknowledge the role of families, of mothers is particular who toil every

day to anchor peace in their homes, which is the foundation of building a culture of peace and sustaining peace in society.

This is unfortunate, despite the existence of early childhood programmes that have been developed across the globe, from Afghanistan to South Africa, to Nigeria, to Cote d'Ivoire, to Turkey and Lebanon, to Jamaica, Chili, Columbia and Brazil. The holistic and inclusive approach of these programmes aim to mitigate trauma, to promote emotional regulation and sensitivity to others, eliminate harsh punishment, and to encourage the formation of positive social relationships within families and communities. This has crucial links to strengthen social cohesion and build peace in society.

Parents participating in the programme in Turkey said that they became more aware of the importance of Early Childhood Development, and their families became more harmonious and peaceful. A mother participating in the programme in a Palestinian refugee camp in Beirut, Lebanon, said that she stopped using harsh punishment on her children: "I talk and listen to them instead of beating them." A mother participating in a women's group in one of the Early Childhood Development community center, established by UNICEF, said: "The group helped me forget the war... We are not the same people we were before, since we're mixed, we're all together we won't fight... Now my kids are in safety... I can work in the field and we can be at peace..."



To raise the voices of families, parents/mothers as agents of change for peace, the Early Childhood Peace Consortium (ECPC) was formed and launched in September 2013. It brought together many partners from multiple sectors including government officials, multi- and bilateral agencies, the social and mass media, as well as academia and practitioners. Its vision is to create an inclusive movement for peace, social justice and prevention of violence through using Early Childhood Development strategies that enable the world community to advance peace, security and sustainable development. This is by demonstrating how Early Childhood Development services contribute to the development of more peaceful homes, communities and societies through increasing social cohesion, equality and economic productivity.

Its goals include:

- linking emerging knowledge from behavior and environmental science with existing scientific evidence;
- mobilizing increased investment in the early years of life, and implementing more effective policies and practices in all countries, ensuring that Early Childhood programmes are essential in promoting the culture of peace; and
- strengthening partnerships with governments, the United Nations, non-governmental organizations, and families/parents/mothers to advance the culture of peace and build peaceful societies.

Our goals are ambitious but there is nothing too ambitious for the cause of peace. Besides, we have every opportunity to make this transformative shift and elevate Early Childhood Development and the role of families/parents/mothers in building peace on the global peace agenda.

In the last few years, the international community witnessed the triumph of the adoption of 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development; the New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants; and the Sustaining Peace Resolutions.

In the historic and memorable meeting of the General Assembly on the 25<sup>th</sup> of September 2015, all Member States adopted the transformative 2030 Agenda. Its 17 goals range from ending poverty in all forms everywhere, to ensuring inclusive and equitable education and promoting life-long learning opportunities for all, to achieve gender equality and to promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development.

It was a particular historic moment for children, particularly the younger children, and their parents/mothers, as for the first time in history Early Childhood Development is included in the development agenda and is recognized as essential for not just human development but also sustainable development.

Also, in the New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants that was adopted on the 19<sup>th</sup> of September 2016, Member States have agreed “to support Early Childhood Development for refugee children.”

However, the real breakthrough came with the adoption of the Resolutions 2280 “On Sustaining Peace,” which emphasize the importance of a comprehensive approach to sustaining peace, particularly through the prevention of conflict and addressing its root causes, as well as reaffirming the important role of women, youth, families and communities in preventing conflict and in building and sustaining peace.

This is all compounded by the rise of civil society and the growing voices of people, of communities and families, and their resolve to work in the service of peace. They want to be heard not only as victims of violence, conflict and displacement, but as agents of change and drivers of peace.

In this new era for peace that promotes the participation of all members of society in peacebuilding efforts, it has become clear and essential to shape innovative and transformative approaches that engage families/parents/mothers and children in the service of peace. This means that we need to put their interests in the heart of our efforts to build a culture of peace. We must empower families/parents/mothers through designing and implementing Early Childhood programmes that are safe, nurturing, inclusive and multi-sectorial (health, nutrition, safety, responsive caregiving and early learning).

Parenting programmes should include peacebuilding components, most importantly, those programmes must address their needs and be

culturally sensitive, and build on what they know, and give them space to be the driving force for change. It is only then that families/parents/mothers can play the role of peace drivers starting from home.

We have the science, the knowledge, the technology, and experience to build a world of peace.

What we need from the global community is an unflinching vision, an unwavering commitment, as well as a strong partnership for and with families/parents/mothers and their children.

There is no better time than now to unite our strengths and elevate the role of mothers as they toil every day to erect building blocks for peace in their home, and raising children as drivers of the culture of peace.

