

**Parallel Event - UN Commission on the Status of Women 68
Statement Delivered by Farah Arabe, Founder of itotheN Consulting
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**Make Mothers Matter: Invest in Mothers
“Making the case for investing in mothers”**

To have a sense of the broad impact motherhood can have on society: Did you know there are 2.1 billion mothers in the world¹, compared to approximately 1.4 billion women who are economically active across all professions². That means that motherhood is the most common profession in the world for women, and yet we don't talk about it enough as an agent of change. Perhaps because the work of mothering is unseen and taken for granted, and apparently confined to the privacy of the home. Yet scientific findings link motherhood to long-term outcomes in peace, health and economics, which are three of the most desired outcomes of international development. Because of my line of work, the angle I will take in this discussion is the impact that the mother-child relationship has on early childhood development and therefore on long-term peace, economics and health.

In a past event that I organized on the topic of care³, Dr. Dana McCoy from the Harvard Graduate School of Education referred to nurturing quality relationships in early childhood as the “foundation of human development”. That's because in the first few years of life our brains have a higher level of

¹ Calculated by itotheN from the following statistics:

80% of women aged 40-44 have given birth to at least one child: "World Fertility Patterns 2015", United Nations Population Division, UNDESA. Assuming the same proportion, number of women aged 15 - 64 in 2023 medium variant: United Nations Population Division, UNDESA <http://data.un.org/Search.aspx?q=world+female+population+2023+by+age>

² Calculated by itotheN from the following statistics:

2022 World Bank labor force participation rate, female: <https://genderdata.worldbank.org/en/indicator/sl-tlf-act-izs?view=bar&geos=WLD&age=15-64>. Number of women aged 15 - 64 in 2023 medium variant: United Nations Population Division, UNDESA <http://data.un.org/Search.aspx?q=world+female+population+2023+by+age>

³ “Women as Carers, Workers and Changemakers: Challenges and Opportunities at the Intersection of the Care Economy, Early Childhood and the Future of Work”. Organized by HKS Women's Network and W20 India, September 6, 2023. Recording here: <https://tinyurl.com/2s8apne9>

neuroplasticity- meaning that the brain's ability to change in response to experiences is higher, and the amount of effort required to make those changes is lower. In infancy, and in the toddler years the brain is optimally responsive to environmental input, and at the rate of 1 million synapses every second, this is really when the foundational circuits of the human brain are getting formed.⁴ At this critical, formative time, what constitutes a healthy environmental input for infants and young children? Nurturing relationships.⁵ Biologically, an infant's brain is programmed to expect responsive, mutual interaction. If children's brains receive what is predicted, they learn that the world is a predictable place; if not, they learn that the world is unpredictable.⁶ The essence of positive early experiences is responsive relationships with the caring adult, usually the mother. As Prof. Jack Shonkoff from the Harvard Center for the Developing Child says "early experiences shape our biology and create either a strong or weak foundation for all the health, learning and behavior that follow for a lifetime".⁷

How do mothers impact long-term societal health? By protecting children from adversity and imparting the positive human connection that buffers against the consequences of adversity. What we know from research at the Harvard Center for the Developing Child⁸, is that adversity results in the activation of our stress systems. If toxic stress becomes chronic early in life, it can precipitate physiological changes in the body that continue into adult life, whether or not there is a conscious memory. So, in other

⁴ Harvard Center for the Developing Child – Brain Architecture. <https://developingchild.harvard.edu/science/key-concepts/brain-architecture/>

⁵ National Scientific Council on the Developing Child (2004). Young Children Develop in an Environment of Relationships: Working Paper No. 1. Retrieved from the Harvard Center for the Developing Child: <https://harvardcenter.wpenginepowered.com/wp-content/uploads/2004/04/Young-Children-Develop-in-an-Environment-of-Relationships.pdf>

⁶ Ibid

⁷ Prof. Jack Shonkoff from the Harvard Center for the Developing Child through the course "The Best Start to Life: Early Childhood Development for Sustainable Development. SDG Academy: <https://tinyurl.com/yanpafce>

⁸ Harvard Center for the Developing Child – In Brief: The Foundations of Life-long Health: <https://developingchild.harvard.edu/resources/inbrief-the-foundations-of-lifelong-health/>

words, adversity can create biological memories in the body.⁹ These biological memories correlate with a higher risk of heart disease and insulin resistance, as well as depression and anxiety in adulthood.¹⁰ We also know from the research of Dr. Christina Bethell et.al¹¹ at Johns Hopkins University that it's not just adversity that can have an impact in long-term health, but also positive childhood experiences that increase resilience and enable positive relationships. For example, feeling safe and protected by an adult at home, being able to talk openly to a family member about feelings and feeling heard, accepted and supported, the belief that family stood by you during difficult times- these positive relational experiences in childhood correlate with 72% lower levels of adult depression and poor mental health, and with 3 1/2 times greater likelihood of getting social and emotional support as an adult when needed. In public health policy terms, mothers are at the forefront of primary prevention.

How do mothers impact long-term economics? Professor James Heckman at the University of Chicago and Noble Prize winner in economics is one of the biggest advocates for investment in early childhood development for long-term economic gains. According to his research, investment in nurturing early environments can give between 7% and 13% return on investment per year per child based on increased school and career achievement as well as reduced costs in remedial education, health and criminal justice system expenditures.¹² And the earlier the investment -starting in utero-, the greater the return; even more so if the investment is made on disadvantaged or vulnerable families.¹³ His work

⁹ Harvard Center for the Developing Child – How Children’s Experiences Affect Their Genes.

<https://developingchild.harvard.edu/resources/what-is-epigenetics-and-how-does-it-relate-to-child-development/>

¹⁰ Harvard Center for the Developing Child – In Brief: The Foundations of Life-long Health:

<https://developingchild.harvard.edu/resources/inbrief-the-foundations-of-lifelong-health/>

¹¹ Christina Bethell, PhD, MBA, MPH; Jennifer Jones, MSW; Narangerel Gombojav, MD, PhD; Jeff Linkenbach, EdD; Robert Sege, MD, PhD, JAMA Pediatr. 2019;173(11):e193007. Published online September 9, 2019. Corrected on September 30, 2019.

<https://jamanetwork.com/journals/jamapediatrics/fullarticle/2749336>

¹² The Heckman Equation: https://heckmanequation.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/F_ROI-Webinar-Deck_birth-to-three_091818.pdf

¹³ Ibid.

shows that quality early childhood development, which throughout the world is primarily led by mothers, is critical for increased IQ (most of which develops by age 3), better school performance, economic productivity, economic equity and stronger national economies.¹⁴

How do mothers affect peace? There is an initiative at Yale University called the Early Childhood Peace Consortium, of which MMM is a part, which was founded on the idea that the root causes of violence and conflict, as well as the main engine for peace building, are in early childhood, in which mothers play a critical role.¹⁵ According to research, experiencing abuse and neglect early in life increases the odds of perpetrating aggressive antisocial acts later in life.¹⁶ For example, a study showed that exposure to physical, sexual or emotional abuse and neglect increased the odds of a future arrest as a youth by 53% and as an adult by 38%.¹⁷ On the other hand, adults who experienced relationships of trust and emotional responsiveness as children have a 1200% greater chance of flourishing life.¹⁸ Positive early relationships are the foundation to positive adult relationships, which can bring about more responsible citizenship, trusting communities and peace. Positive adult relationships also happen to be the key to long-term happiness, according to the longest study ever conducted on happiness by Robert Waldinger.¹⁹ And who do we first learn to relate to? Our mothers.²⁰

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Peacebuilding Through Early Childhood Development, Early Childhood Peace Consortium (ECPC).

<https://medicine.yale.edu/childstudy/policy-and-social-innovation/global-peace-building/>

¹⁶ Leckman, JF., Panter-Brick, C., & Salah, R. (Eds.). (2014). Pathways to Peace: The Transformative Power of Children and Families (link is external). Cambridge, MA: MIT Press. <https://ecdpeace.org/work-content/revolutionary-volume-pathways-peace-transformative-power-children-families>

¹⁷ Widom CS. Does violence beget violence? A critical examination of the literature. Psychol Bull. 1989 Jul;106(1):3-28. doi: 10.1037/0033-2909.106.1.3. PMID: 2667008. <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/2667008/>

¹⁸ Bethell CD, Gombojav N, Whitaker RC. Family Resilience And Connection Promote Flourishing Among US Children, Even Amid Adversity. Health Aff (Millwood). 2019 May;38(5):729-737. doi: 10.1377/hlthaff.2018.05425. PMID: 31059374.

<https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/31059374/>

¹⁹ Harvard Study of Adult Development. <https://www.adultdevelopmentstudy.org>

²⁰ Schneider, E.L. Attachment theory and research: Review of the literature. Clin Soc Work J 19, 251–266 (1991).

<https://doi.org/10.1007/BF00754722>. <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/bf00754722#citeas>

On top of all the impact mothers have in the long term, in the immediate term, we do most of the care work at home, basically doing the unpaid work that allows all paid work to happen. One of the central findings in the research of Dr. Claudia Goldin, Nobel Prize winner in economics in 2023, is that differences in pay and labor force participation among heterosexual couples are due to differences in the division of unpaid caregiving responsibilities²¹. Angela Garbes, an inspiring author on caregiving, puts it this way: "Women provide a huge unacknowledged subsidy to the smooth functioning of our economies, which would grind to a halt if women stopped doing this work."²² Care of children is a privately provided service that should be considered a public good, one in which all sectors of society play a role to build because it represents the cradle of human capital- and of humanity.

Policies can provide support to mothers directly or create an enabling environment for mothers. As Dr. Gabor Mate says, parenting now a days is like doing "horticulture in the moon"²³ -nothing is conducive to success. There are many policies countries can use -from setting up quality care infrastructures, to financial support for families, to paid parental leave, etc. It is difficult to know which the right policies are to implement when and where, as each county is different. But a framework for thought developed by itotheN around these policies, particularly during the early years of motherhood are:

1. An environment of mental and financial freedom: Enable parental leave through legislation, or other means, such as provisional cash transfers, company matching savings programs, borrowing on

²¹ Goldin C (2021) Career and family: women's century-long journey toward equity. Princeton University Press, Princeton

²² Garbes, Angela. Essential Labor: Mothering As Social Change First edition., Harper Wave, an imprint of HarperCollinsPublishers, 2022.

²³ Maté, Gabor and Daniel, Maté. The Myth of Normal: Trauma, Illness, & Healing in a Toxic Culture Avery, an imprint of Penguin Random House, 2022.

future earnings programs, that allow parents the time, space and freedom to devote to their relationship with their child.

2. Impart the care and support: From home visitation programs by nurse/social worker/mental health professionals/mothers' helpers, to having access to high-quality care arrangements for all families.

3. Impart the skills and knowledge for conscious parenthood: When I first became a parent I did not know that being a parent would help me heal, and that healing would make me a better parent. I certainly didn't know anything about brain science, relational health or early childhood development. I didn't know any parenting techniques or tactics other than what I experienced in my own childhood.

I would like to close by saying that by supporting a mother you are not just supporting a woman, you are supporting all of humanity because we are all their children. The world needs mothers, but mothers also need the world to support them.

Thank you.