

*Brief Report on Our Conversation*

**Mothers Without Borders:**

Steering Youth Away from Violent Extremism

At Harvard University  
July 13th-17th, 2018

*You never change things by fighting the existing reality.  
To change something, build a new model that makes the existing model obsolete.*  
Buckminster Fuller

“I can see peace instead of this.” With these words, Amy Post opened the second iteration of the Mothers Without Borders conversation. The conference, organized by Hauwa Ibrahim, assembled thoughtful, distinguished attendees from fifteen countries to discuss some of the most pressing questions faced by our global society today: What does a peaceful world look like, and what are the concrete steps we must take in order to achieve it? How do we steer youth away from the violent extremism that ravages families and communities throughout the world?

With nearly half of the world’s population (43%) under the age of twenty-four, and ninety percent of these youth living in developing countries, discussion of these inquiries is of the utmost importance. Over the course of five days, participants contributed their diverse experiences in the humanities, law, education, government, and entrepreneurship to the conversation.

Despite the widespread and complex nature of the issue, there seems to be a common set of factors that drive youth to extremism, as articulated and echoed by conference attendees from diverse regions of the world. The link between unemployment and extremism is well identified, for example. Environments lacking role models, educational opportunities, and meaningful employment can stagnate growth and promote restiveness. Segregation and perceived powerlessness compound these economic frustrations to alienate youth, sowing the seeds of extremism.

*What’s is a name?*

The conference’s moniker -- Mother’s Without Borders -- holds great significance in the discussion of how to steer youth away from violent extremism. A key point in the conversation was the relevant adage that it takes a village to raise a child; the family possesses a “soft power” that, when galvanized, can transform societies. Mothers, both biological and community based, exude the strength, love, and compassion that can counter the tide of youth extremism, and we must harness their intentions to promote peace.

The need to address youth violence is staggering as youth represent both our greatest challenge and our greatest hope.

- At the beginning of 2012, the world population surpassed 7 billion with people under the age of 30 accounting for more than half of this number (50.5%). Close to 90% of people under 30 lived in emerging and developing economies.
- Countries in sub-Saharan Africa had the youngest proportion of population in the world with over 70% of the region's population aged below 30. (The World's Youngest Populations, Euromonitor International, 2012)

How well these young people transition to adulthood — and how well governments integrate them economically, politically, and socially — will influence whether countries thrive or implode. Surging populations of young people will have the power to drive political and social norms, influence what modes of governance will be adopted and the role women/Mothers' will play in society and embrace or discredit extremist ideologies. They are the fulcrums on which future social attitudes rest.

These young people could transform entire regions, making them more prosperous, more just, and more secure. Or they could also unleash a flood of instability and violence. Or both. ("Here Come the Young", Foreign Policy, Kristin Lord, August 12, 2016)

These statistics were behind our mission and vision for our conversations.

We discussed the need to create an environment that offers hope and opportunity by providing for basic needs, education, jobs, safety, equality for women, religious tolerance and combatting racism. We heard about a transformative model for combatting hate and promoting understanding across enemy lines that involved bringing youth together from opposing sides to spend time together as conference participants and even roommates.

We visited the Boston Museum of Science where we learned that cultural relevance is valued and field-tested science curriculum has been developed where each lesson centers around a child from a different country and even revolving around an object of cultural significant –

We visited Wellesley Centers for Women, with excellent presentations by the Executive Director and Researchers' on the need for a convergence of theory and practice be the way forward. After a great tour of the Massachusetts State House, Representative Russell Holmes treated us to a heart-warming session and conversation on how we all belong to one human family and together we could make change happen. A visit at the MIT Deshpande Center of Innovation, Legatum Center and Playlabs and were heights of our time together seeing the focus on using technology to develop solutions to challenges and global problems.

*Where do we go from here?*

Homegrown and contextual solutions are key; we must invest in young people and give them the opportunity to enact change. De Visser spoke about his organization, Global Unites, which takes a grass roots approach to conflict transformation in numerous countries around the world. Global Unites focuses on the youth themselves, empowering them to change their communities and equipping them with the tools for reducing prejudice and conflict. The peace in Sri Lanka came from *inside* the youth--they were sick and tired of the violence and they were the ones who started seeking peace from within--in words, in actions, in deeds. Violence is not a solution and will not realize the goals that extremists promise; to achieve lasting societal change we must encourage youth to utilize their skills, passions, hearts, and minds.

As the success discussed indicates, education is paramount in conflict transformation. Education should convey *how* to understand differences. It was further suggested that curriculum of national literature should be instituted to encourage and promote unity. The human rights school in Toulouse pioneered a human rights curriculum that can be extrapolated for other regions.

If we are to steer youth away from violent extremism, we must invest in them the way a mother invests in her child. The human soul needs *something* to grab onto--responsibility to someone or something else. Every person is imbued with unassailable dignity, and we need to instill in all students the sentiment that they--and the work that they do--matter. By conveying to young people that they have great potential to enact positive change, we can steer them away from the course of violent extremism.

We must establish coalitions of peace builders in order to promote the ideals we've discussed over the five days. We've already taken this step by building a strong network through our Mothers without Borders conversation. With this conversation, peace--and the steps to get there--are a little more visible, and we can take the lessons we've learned to our own corners of the world. Our time together forged new friendships that span the globe.

*Until We meet Again!*

The conversation took a decidedly hopeful tone as we sought to derive empirically based recommendations drawn from the multifaceted experiences of all in attendance.

Children are not born with a penchant for violence, as emphasized; prejudice inherited from one's community and upbringing can be overcome by real life experience. We will continue to light the candle and shine in our little and not so little corners of the global—Let Peace be STILL and Mothers' Soft Power be engaged.

**Dated July 31<sup>st</sup> 2018**