



Conversation with Hannah Rothschild

Ashley Hopkinson

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Ashley Hopkinson: Can you introduce yourself and tell me more about your work?

Hannah Rothschild: I'm Hannah Rothschild. I lead the communications work at the Van Leer Foundation. The Van Leer Foundation is a global Dutch organization that invests in a good start for all children so that children, caregivers and communities can flourish. We're headquartered in The Hague, but we work globally now at the moment in Brazil, India, Israel, Jordan, and the Netherlands. We also do a lot of work on global displacement. The main focus of our work is scaling policies and programs that support young children, their caregivers around the world, working closely with governments, but also bringing in stakeholders from around the world.

The Foundation focuses exclusively on early childhood, so we're really talking about kids or from pregnancy until the age of five. In our current strategy, however, we're taking a more holistic approach and looking a lot at caregivers, particularly parents, and what they also need to thrive in today's societies.

Ashley Hopkinson: In the Wellbeing Alliance dialogue (October 2023), you mentioned Eye Mama and a concept around shifting the way people see motherhood. That caught my attention. Can you share a little bit about that project, what it was and how it developed from your vantage point?

Hannah Rothschild: Real stories about care and caregivers, it's not really visible enough in the media and social discourse and also in decision making. We googled parenting and childcare and what you get is a lot of glossy images that look at the sort of perfect story of the way society portrays what parents do with their kids. But we know that when we're talking to parents and listening to what they

have to say, this is not the story, it's only part of the story and we need to tell a bigger picture [story] around this. We came across the Eye Mama project in 2023 because we were looking for more accurate depictions, visual depictions of parenthood and caregiving.

The Eye Mama Project is a sort of photography platform that was created by Karni Arieli. She's based in the UK, she's a photographer and she features images from other mother photographers around the world that share both the light and dark aspects of what real life looks like for parents. And a lot of these photographers were capturing their daily lives within their homes, particularly during the COVID pandemic, which really shed a light on what was happening behind closed doors when both parents and kids were kind of confined to that space.

This project took on a life of its own. It turned into a book, it was covered extensively by media and it also fostered really strong community connections with other mother photographers who had all contributed to this platform. So we were thrilled when we came across it because it really filled this sort of gap that we were looking for when it came to visualizing what parenting or parenthood looks like. The foundation also supported the project to do an exhibition in our office here in the Hague where we also showcased it to other Dutch leaders, both from politics and the field of the arts. We also featured the project in our annual journal because we strongly believe that these are the types of visual stories that need elevation and that need to be made more visible around the world.

Ashley Hopkinson: That's wonderful. So you guys were able to take what was a photography platform and a community of mother photographers and then invite a new audience into seeing those images and that visualization, because you put it in the journal, you had this exhibition at the office. Do you think the impact is that you were able to convene these groups of people together to elevate the work? Or is it a combination of both the fact that these moms were getting together and then also you guys were able to showcase it in another way?

Hannah Rothschild: The project obviously had an impact way beyond anything that we independently contributed towards it, but I think where we came in was maybe reaching new audiences that the platform hadn't already reached through the coverage that had already picked up. So really kind of taking these visuals and putting them in front of early childhood practitioners, policy decision makers and other leaders from different sectors who immediately resonated with the images because it looked a lot like their personal experiences, what they went through during the pandemic. And it made a lot of people realize how universal and how urgent supporting caregivers around the world really is.

Ashley Hopkinson: In an earlier conversation you mentioned Bogotá Care Blocks as a program showing true potential in the care economy space and helping in the day-to-day. Are there other programs, services and initiatives bubbling to the surface to better serve parents and communities? Or would you like to share more about that example?

Hannah Rothschild: Yes, when we initially started talking about caregiver well being, a lot of people we were talking to were kind of boxing it around the very narrow conversation around mental health. Which immediately led to initiatives or programs, for example, on things like postnatal depression. And while that's incredibly important, we realize that caregivers need a much larger spectrum of support that addresses various needs that they come across in their day-to-day caregiving responsibilities. And so we've identified a couple of initiatives that really appear from different entry points to have a big impact on the lives of parents.

One that really stands out is just the importance of affordable and accessible childcare. This sort of need that it's not parents alone who need to provide care for children 24/7 and that having other services available close to them and within a sort of financial range that's feasible for them, it's critically important. And we've seen really innovative examples coming from across the world.

A good example of this is Kidogo in Kenya, which is a social enterprise where they train entrepreneurs, “*mamapreneurs*,” to set up their own childcare facilities that women who live in those informal settlements who need to work but also need to find a reliable and safe and caring childcare solution for their children can rely on. And what that then allows mothers to do, is to have somewhere where they feel confident and safe to leave their children and also create some economic opportunities for other women in the community to provide those services. And so we find that that's something that's really important that just sort of fundamentally strengthens the systems of care around parents.

Another thing that we found is really helpful to parents, not just parents of young children but all parents, is sort of looking at group care models, especially for parents who are struggling in a broad variety of contexts. So not necessarily addressing it on a one-to-one basis, but bringing parents together with similar challenges so they can hear from each other and help each other to solve whatever they're currently working on, often talking from their own previous experiences. And it really helps parents feel like they're not alone and it allows them to form connections with peers in their community. So that even when programs run their course and come to an end, there's still a connection between parents who continue to provide that support to each other in the longer term.

And then the other example that is also good to re-share is Bogotá Care Blocks, in Bogotá, Columbia. It does an amazing job at recognizing the enormous amount of work that goes into care and that women play in keeping their families healthy and resilient. We know particularly in Columbia but around the world that the majority of this care work is unpaid and it's done by women.

And what these care blocks do, their physical spaces in neighborhoods close to the women's homes where they can come to both fulfill care responsibilities. So doing things like washing laundry or doing paperwork or just doing child minding, but also spaces where they're able to take care of themselves either through physical exercise or counseling or training for professional opportunities. And I think that that really makes a difference as well in terms of just valuing the women who are doing such vital and fundamental care work within these communities.

Ashley Hopkinson: That's so great. I like the framing of systems of care around parents. Do you think those programs have the potential to be replicated or scaled in other communities? What is happening in Kenya with mamapreneurs and in Columbia with Bogotá Blocks? What's your sense from just learning about these programs, whether or not they could work elsewhere?

Hannah Rothschild: Replicating it, I don't know if it would work because it's definitely been designed to a communal issue within that environment. But at the same time, I think a lot of the key elements of both initiatives are applicable and can be replicated in other places. So we can already see that many other countries in Africa who also have large informal settlements with a lot of informal work have come and learned from Kidogo about how to replicate a sort of social enterprise model around childcare. So it's definitely replicable in that sense.

And then even in the bucket of Bogotá Care Blocks, obviously it's very much built around I would say a South American culture around caregiving and how that works and how cities are designed in that context. So often these women who need to both work and provide caregiving responsibilities, live far away from where they may have an office job, so sort of centering it in those neighborhoods is really important.

But those conditions also exist, for example, in other Latin American countries. And so you've also found a lot of other governments from Latin America going to and learning from that example and replicating or at least replicating certain pieces of the Care Blocks program into other services or into other urban spaces that already exist in other cities. And that's been really effective as well.

Ashley Hopkinson: Have you noticed any kind of shifts in how we address caregiving? And do you think there has been a shift in how people think about caregiving?

Hannah Rothschild: Parents themselves are speaking up more, not necessarily just on caregiving but on a broad range of issues. You can see parent movements around particular issues from things like Black Lives Matter to climate change. There's a growing power in parent voices. The pandemic also really laid clear or laid bare the importance of functioning care ecosystems and (without them) parents were put under immense pressure and they realized that something really has to change.

There's also things that have shifted in how people talk about this issue. You'll see that, for example, this idea of parental burnout or having parents speak more openly about their challenges is increasingly common. You see this sort of this shift away from perfect parenting advice on social media platforms to sort of more honest storytelling through a spectrum of different experiences. But there's still work to be done in making this issue a priority in government and figuring out where it sits or how cross-sectoral collaboration can really come together on this issue.

When we talk about caregiver well being, governments might even say, okay, yes, it's important, but where does it sit, in which department? It's still not really clear and there's not a particular sector saying that this is our issue. For example, I think if anything, it sits under health sectors, but then it's very much limited in scope to mental health or physical health of parents. But we know that well being is just so much more than that at the foundation. We've been trying to think more holistically of how we can bring leaders from across sectors, across government departments to collaborate.

So we know that for example, in urban development, housing and affordable housing is a key factor that influences parental stress. But there's a lot that can then be done by the sector to support healthier places for families to live, but more affordable, accessible, and that are designed with family needs in mind. And at the same time, economic policies or workplace policies are also kind of realizing the role that they have to play that enables people to balance both work and caregiving responsibilities. That said, there's still a lot more that needs to happen in this inter-sectoral space to make more leaders realize how vital caregiver well being is for building flourishing societies.

Ashley Hopkinson: What do you think leaders and decision makers can do to improve collaboration and to help advance the conversation around caregiving?

Hannah Rothschild: We discuss this a lot internally because it's one of our key goals is to get leaders to care more about this issue and not just care about it, but be willing to take action on it. We often talk about the fact that many leaders and decision makers are parents themselves or at least to some extent have some sort of caregiving responsibility or have had some experience of caregiving responsibility. And we try to get them to reflect and realize their own experiences, the emotions they felt, the frustrations, the challenges, and realizing they also have the ability in their day-to-day to make

that experience different for others. And I think when people feel it personally or they understand the complexity and the challenges in a very different way, it then allows them to be more open and willing to address this issue and also be willing to work with others to find really tangible solutions.

The first few years of parenthood are a bit of a blur. Where I think even leaders who are in that position, they are so saturated by everything they need to make and once they're out of that sort of critical stage, they tend to forget everything that's happened. It's kind of blocked out, they can't really remember. So I think there's a different way in which we can engage leaders to really reflect on their experiences as parents and bring that into their work. But at the same time make sure that the voices of the sort of constituents that these leaders serve are sort of vocal towards making sure that the leaders that they voted for are aware of their priorities and prioritize that in their day-to-day decision making.

Ashley Hopkinson: So from your perspective, empathy can actually go a long way in trying to help people to connect to the experience of other parents and maybe that will make its way into actionable things such as policy changes as well? What do you think is necessary to demonstrate the value of the care economy? Is it that there is an economic argument for it?

Hannah Rothschild: We've been using this economic argument on why early childhood development [is critical] for a long time. So this idea that it's sort of the best investment that you can make in terms of long-term yields on investments. Every dollar usually yields 10 plus dollars in improved education outcomes, income, earnings, health expenditure. And while it seems like it's really compelling, we haven't actually seen that argument make a big impact in policy makers then prioritizing this or allocating significant amounts of budget to it because it's such a long term kind of payout. Policy makers are thinking, I need to show economic value in the next four years.

So making the economic argument, I don't know if that's actually going to be the most effective way at getting this issue to become a priority of the government. I do see governments, however, realizing that things need to change and that current systems are exacerbating things like inequality, and that's having a huge impact on mental health and the immediate mental health costs can be quite destabilizing for governments.

It also depends where, I think in the Netherlands we're very acutely aware for example, that how much burnout or mental health sick leave impacts the economy. I don't know whether or not that's as broadly recognized around the world. But I do think that the wellbeing economy movement is already shifting governments' mindsets around how to design policy, and what the policy priorities should be. But the current wellbeing narrative, I still feel that a lot of people talk about it as something very

personal. So people often think of my well being or your wellbeing and we can achieve that independently. But this wellbeing is incredibly shared and incredibly social. [...] We see healthy and supportive relationships as critical for everybody's wellbeing... the caregiver positive interactions between parent and child sets the foundation of a person's ability to form those relationships that are so integral to their wellbeing, which I think has been so foundational for wellbeing economies.

Ashley Hopkinson: I want to pivot to talk about challenges for a moment. What are the barriers to expanding parental care at a more systemic level? And overall, what challenges do you see, what gaps do you think there are to advancing this work?

Hannah Rothschild: As I mentioned, I don't think any one sector should take responsibility for it. It needs to be sort of a cross sectoral collaboration. And at the same time, if no one's in the lead or no one's really pushing this agenda forward, it can often then be nobody's priorities. So really figuring out how to champion or how to elevate this issue so there is ownership, so that sort of progress on this issue gets driven forward is something that we're currently grappling with. How do you make that happen and at the same time still leave that sort of space for different sectors to come in and support it. And the solutions of that could vary from place to place. I think sometimes then having a sort of champion department in a government could be a way forward.

So for example, the Ministry for Women's Affairs who led the Care Blocks, they owned this, but they definitely worked with many other city departments to be able to realize the Care Blocks project. So I definitely think finding a home and ownership for this issue in government so that it can actually be driven forward is incredibly important. I also think that getting the private sector to realize their role, their contribution to this is incredibly important. That's a mix between just raising awareness to those stakeholders and at the same time really giving the leaders who are really doing incredible work already, acknowledgement to strengthen and boost them as a spokesperson towards their sector, so that it's not necessarily coming from us or from government, but it's really kind of also championed and led by them. It's a great way to overcome some initial barriers when it comes to figuring out who's going to take the lead and what's needed in terms of resources.

Ashley Hopkinson: I would like to talk to you about what you learned from what was successful. Do you have any lessons that you think are worth sharing from programs that either your organization has implemented or you've seen implemented that are thriving or making a difference or can be a guidepost for others?

Hannah Rothschild: OK, I'll give some overarching insights that we've come across rather than talk specifically to particular initiatives. One of the key learnings that we had from our previous strategy

and something that we also realized so critically important, especially when talking about caregiver well being, is really taking the time to ask caregivers what they need or to be open to feedback and not necessarily just assume that what you are thinking of programmatically is the right approach. Sometimes really small adjustments can make all the difference to parents.

An example of this is we're currently working with the affordable housing sector, so property developers and fund managers, trying to get them to design houses or homes, buildings, that are better for families. And a big part of that is getting parents of young kids to participate in a lot of the participatory design or community engagement. (However, the organizers) saw that parents weren't attending and we asked them, why don't you come to these meetings? And they say, you organized at 5:00 PM on a weeknight and I'm trying to get my kids fed and in the bath and to bed.

So small things like making sure that it happened during the day, that they're provided childcare next to the consultation; I think it just makes it a lot easier for parents to be able to participate and engage and contribute so that it's really clear on what would make the biggest impact for them or what they need.

That then ties to the next point, which is easiness. In this time of life, parents of young kids are completely overwhelmed and saturated by the responsibilities and the pressures around early parenthood; they're often sleep-deprived. So programs and initiatives that are particularly burdensome when it comes to things like process or paperwork really aren't effective. You really then exclude a lot of families from engaging in a way that would have the most impact.

A great example of this is the sort of governments providing things like childcare subsidies. But to be able to access those subsidies, it's incredibly vague and requires a lot of paperwork. And that leads to a lot of parents not even accessing the support that is already available. So really thinking about how do you make it easy? ...Really thinking about the behavioral blocks around programming is incredibly important, particularly for caregivers of young kids.

Lastly, for programs to be successful, it's really important to focus on parents, but it shouldn't just be about parents. This ties into what I said at the beginning, that it's really thinking about more holistically the ecosystem of support around parents. That definitely means engaging other potential caregivers, whether or not it's informal from other family members, grandparents, friends, communities, and also more formal professionals, so childcare workers, for example.

Too often we design programs that are for the parents, so it's sort of providing mental health coaching directly or kind of making their wellbeing their responsibility. But to really improve the wellbeing of

parents is to make sure they have enough support around them so that they're able to have moments for themselves to take a break to recover...so definitely designing solutions that aren't just about the parent, but really thinking about how do we bring more people into caregiving solutions is incredibly important.

Ashley Hopkinson: Thank you Hannah. I appreciate your time.

Ashley Hopkinson is an award-winning journalist, newsroom entrepreneur and leader dedicated to excellent storytelling and mission-driven media. She currently manages the Solutions Insights Lab, an initiative of the Solutions Journalism Network. She is based in New Orleans, Louisiana.

** This conversation has been edited and condensed.*