



“Having someone who is trusted in the community as a focal point is always very important”: Rima Yacoub of Reclaim Childhood on using sport and mentorship to empower girls

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Eleanore Catolico: Please introduce yourself and tell me what's distinctive about your approach in the field of youth mental health.

Rima Yacoub: I'm Rima Yacoub, the Jordan Program Director for Reclaim Childhood. Our work is substantial in our communities because we have direct access to families, the girls and the participants. We use sport as a tool for development. We all know the importance of sport in supporting well-being and mental health. In building connections through our coaches who are part of the same communities, this also builds a support system and a safe environment for the girls. All this reinforces well-being, a feeling of safety and belonging, and also supports mental health and mental well-being.

Eleanore Catolico: Where do you do this work and what types of sports?

Rima Yacoub: We work in three cities in Jordan. One is Amman, the capital city, and two other cities, Zarqa and Mafraq. We operate in four hub sites, two in the capital city, and two outside the city. Amman is the hub for diversity, because the majority of the refugee population is there. We only work with girls from ages 6 to 18 who are Jordanian, Syrian, Sudanese, Somali, Yemeni, Iraqi, and a few Egyptians. Egyptians are not refugees in Jordan, but they are considered a marginalized population.

We recruit women from the same communities in which we operate, and build their capacity. They become the coaches and work day in, day out with the girls. It's about building a community and a safe space. We run an after-school program for girls. We start with the school calendar year, finish with the school year, and break during exams. We run throughout the year in these four hub sites. Each girl gets training twice a week.

Our mission is to provide safe and inclusive spaces for refugee and Jordanian girls to thrive through playing sports. We introduce mainly team sports, including soccer,

basketball, and frisbee. Our methodology is a bit different. It's not only the technique or skill we teach, we also connect all our support objectives to social objectives.

Safety for us starts from the second the girl leaves her home. We provide transportation. A bus picks up the girl, takes her to the field and drops her off. The coach is the first on the bus and the last to leave. I always like to emphasize that safety also starts with communication because even the channel of communication between the coaches and the girls through their parents, or directly with parents, is also a safe space for them.

Eleanore Catolico: What might others find surprising about your work?

Rima Yacoub: We work with women only. We build the capacity of the coaches for women who probably do not have any sports background. We work with them for years. At our sites, when you see the practice, you see coaches who are very well equipped, and very dedicated to giving their best out there on the field.

We give women, either Jordanian or refugees, the opportunity to improve their lives. Giving these women the opportunity to learn, grow, improve, and also have some income generation opportunities, is special. We invest in the progression of our girls through our coaches. Some of them start with us very young and continue on.

We work with girls ages 6 through 18. Some girls started with us in the younger cohort, then evolved to participate in the older cohort, and also participated in the leadership and enrichment program. Four of our 20 coaches used to be participants. One started at the age of 11, another at 13. After they turned 18 and finished all the previous programs, they became part of our alumni. We recruited them to become our coaches, and gave them the opportunity to grow even further.

Eleanore Catolico: The Youth Mental Health Wellbeing Co-Lab has three focus areas, building young people's resilience, giving them agency, and helping them build a sense of community and belonging. What focus does your work take?

Rima Yacoub: We contribute to all three. The resilience that sport builds for all practitioners is remarkable. Through sports, we learn that sometimes we fail, sometimes we do not know how to master a technique, or master a skill. We just lose sometimes. But we learn to bounce back from the times we do not win, make the best of the experience, and get better. Our enrichment program also focuses on resilience, not only our sport program. For our leadership and enrichment program, we work with adolescent girls ages 13 to 17.

We recruit 15 girls from each hub area. They commit to a one-year program called *Qudrati*, which means 'my capability'. It focuses on multiple areas, including identity, self, the circles of strength, what the circle of life means, who is the other, how we build boundaries, how we explore our potential and leadership skills, learning how to deal with others, and also how to say no when we need to say no.

As we build throughout the year, from the beginning, we start teaching the girls what it means to be a good global citizen, regardless of your nationality, because good citizenship has nothing to do with where you're coming from. You can always contribute and give back to your community. This is also where we build community and embrace our identities, the inherited and the acquired. We build agency because, through becoming a better citizen, you learn you also have a responsibility to your community.

We start building with them through a community service project. They start thinking about the problems in their community that they need to solve. How to be a social entrepreneur and build a teeny tiny project that can help their community? Towards the end of the year, they start implementing their community service project. This builds agency. The girls also communicate with their colleagues who will be participating the year after, and they do some knowledge transfer through formal sessions as well. We address almost all of these three components in our program.

Eleanore Catolico: How do you collaborate with organizations working in the same focus area or others?

Rima Yacoub: We always try to build relations with other organizations, especially the ones working on a grassroots level. We always try to explore areas of collaboration. For example, we specialize in sport for development and using sport as a tool for social change, but we can really use support from experts in the area of psychosocial support. This is how we connect with other organizations.

We also connect with other organizations, for example, 7hills Skatepark. They use skating also as a tool for development and social cohesion. Some of our girls also participate in their programs. We work day in and day out to build a bigger database to connect our families to their very specific needs, from legal aid, for example, or even financial aid. We're trying to build our referral system. This is still a work in progress.

We always make sure to map in our database who is working on the ground, how we can help them, how they can help us, and how we can complement each other's work. Multiple organizations are running great programs for education, informal academic support, psychosocial support, and legal aid. We invest in our partnerships with them.

Eleanore Catolico: With organizations that also work to help girls and the populations that you serve, are any trends emerging that you think are exciting, or could help advance the work you're doing now?

Rima Yacoub: I appreciate organizations that are always studying the needs of a community, and basing their programs on the actual impact that can happen from their programs. All programs designed to make an impact on the ground are really exciting.

I like organizations that focus on academic support and education outside the school system, because this always supports our mission. If we provide such a service alongside sports, we become more convincing to parents for their girls to commit more to our programs. In Jordan, and in our region in general, sport for the longest time was

not seen as a priority. It's been always seen as luxury, or sometimes even a waste of time. Like, you want to play? You can play at home.

It's heartwarming when you see a family that starts to realize the importance of sport, and how much it supports mental well-being and academic achievement. Also, when we provide other services, if you are committed to our sports program, you can also access psychosocial and academic support to help you in school, for example. We are going beyond mainstream aid that gives financial support. We do not do that. We provide support that actually helps girls evolve and grow.

Eleanore Catolico: Can you give an example to illustrate the impact of your work?

Rima Yacoub: A Syrian girl started with us at the age of 14, which is a tough age. She lived through the war and fled from Syria. On or off the field, she was always very aggressive. She did not have any friends, and her behavior was really tough. We received notes from her mom that she also had some aggressive behavior on the street.

One of the toughest things was that she was also struggling in making friends, and nobody would approach her. She then participated in our leadership and enrichment program, and started evolving and progressing. Day after day she softened up a bit and started making friends. After a couple of years in the program, it was very rewarding and heartwarming to see her on the field with friends, super excited, very athletic, gaining new skills day after day, very committed, with zero absences in the program.

One thing I always like to remind myself and our coaches is that you see the impact of our work on the ground. This is our role. We have small impacts here and there. The small impact we made in her life will drive her to make more impact in her community.

Eleanore Catolico: What happened to make her connect and change her behavior a bit? What about the program or anyone she met that helped spur the change?

Rima Yacoub: I believe she also went through a journey herself. Being surrounded by girls of the same age but different backgrounds can be intimidating at the beginning, but at the same time, when she saw everyone together, eventually, we're creatures who want to belong, and this slowly became more appealing to her. Her journey in the leadership and enrichment program, in exploring herself, helped her accept her identity more throughout the process.

Part of the work we do addresses difficult emotions and feelings, and how to deal with them, learning how to analyze, understand, and accept them. This was also part of how she learned to accept and understand more about what was happening, and it opened up some areas where she saw that she could actually grow. This played a role in her evolution. She was very smart, and achieved a lot of maturity in finding her way. I believe our method also contributed to her exploration journey.

Eleanore Catolico: Everyone learns as much from things that don't work as things that do. Anything you tried that didn't work, but that you learned from?

Rima Yacoub: Yes. It's also trial and error. Let me reflect a bit on our expansion journey. For so many years, we were working in two cities, only Amman and Zarqa, and we had only 10 coaches on the ground. In the year 2021, we started exploring expansion. We started doing some summer outreach and sport camps in areas where we do not usually operate.

We reached out to different communities. We picked some coaches. We held some summer camps here and there, and then chose one location to expand to. The summer [camp] was a great success, especially in that area. At the beginning, there was full trust that the operations would work the way we expected, that everything would go according to what we imagined and that this would be super easy.

But things do not always work that way. It turned out we needed a more solid base, more research on areas and people, and probably more trial and error. From our first expansion, we learned a lot, and we started focusing more on building community partnerships before we expanded into that area.

We worked on more in-depth interviewing of the coaches, getting to know them more, training them more so that we would avoid this mistake. The next expansion was a much better success. Whenever we do other summer and winter camps, they are all based on much more studying, and they turn out very successfully.

Eleanore Catolico: Any insights or teachable lessons from your work that others could use?

Rima Yacoub: The importance of having someone who is trusted in the community as a focal point is always very important, especially when we're talking about international organizations operating on the ground. It is very important that the community feels that you are part of it and embraces you, otherwise it will not accept your work. This is one of the main lessons.

It is always important to understand the context in which you operate to ensure your operations keep running. It is also important to study the actual needs of your participants or beneficiaries to make sure you provide programs to keep them intrigued and wanting to come to the programs, rather than just give them a one-time thing.

These are the main things. Always look for ways to sustain your operations, whether to have them be self-sustaining, which is very hard, or through donors, especially now at a time where the fundraising world is becoming tighter and tighter.

Always involve parents when you're working with children under age 18, because they have a great role in influencing their kids. Always provide tools with programs that also raise their awareness and improve well-being, because this can directly affect the lives of participants under age 18.

Eleanore Catolico: How would you define current attitudes towards youth mental health? Have you seen attitudes shift in your community or sector? If so, what contributed to that change?

Rima Yacoub: Yes. In our culture in general and probably in other cultures, talking about mental health and well-being can be a taboo. If you say you are unwell, then it means you're sick, something we cannot talk about. At least in the communities where we work, and the girls we work with, I can see some shifts. I can see them feeling more comfortable talking about what's happening. There's still some resistance in the general community, in understanding how important and essential it is to address these mental issues, and to talk about them openly, because this is part of the solution. We still have a long way to go.

Eleanore Catolico: Of those that are warming up to the idea, what do you think is making them more open-minded about it?

Rima Yacoub: The sense of safety, a feeling they will not be judged, and also, when they hear from other people close to them that there is a way to be better. I focus on making sure girls are in an environment where they can be themselves and can express whatever struggle they're going through without being judged, blamed or ignored.

Sometimes we also do mother programming. Because they know us and the coaches, we become very close to the community, and the mom can open up to a coach. They can speak to us about absolutely anything. They do not feel ashamed of talking, expressing themselves, or seeking help. This is a major first step.

During our leadership and enrichment program, we design a couple of sessions for moms. One is about how to deal with difficult emotions, designed for their age group. Another is about coping mechanisms to deal with stress. When you teach them these valuable tools, you also build trust, and they see the value in what we do. They also encourage their girls to open up.

We are careful. We do not get into matters where we do not have know-how. We would not do a therapy session for a girl, for example, because definitely we're not experts in that. But we use the help of experts. We brought a few experts to work directly with our coaches to build their capacity in different ways, including how to work with the girls and identify someone who is struggling through a hard time.

Eleanore Catolico: What barriers to changing minds still exist? What is needed to change the way people think about youth mental health?

Rima Yacoub: In general, the challenges are related to the culture. The other thing is the lack of enough mental support services and the accessibility of such services. If you are struggling, but you do not have enough money to seek support and help, then you probably would think it's better to just suppress it and keep it to yourself. This is, unfortunately, the case for so many who cannot afford to seek help. In a culture where this is a taboo, there's a lack of awareness about services that are accessible for free.

The other thing is the capacity to actually reach out. More awareness needs to be done on our part, not only rethink childhood as social workers. As an organization that uses sport as a tool, or other organizations focusing on mental wellbeing and tools that

directly support it, more awareness should be done, more outreach to families and girls. This is really crucial.

Eleanore Catolico: How do you hear and incorporate youth voices in shaping your work, or the broader narrative on mental health?

Rima Yacoub: Because we work with youth day in and day out, have direct access and a close relationship with them through our coaches, we always hear their needs. We train our coaches how to be more observant of girls' behavior, more reflective on what is happening, and be aware of even the physical appearance of the participants.

The coaches play a great role in reaching out to the girls. At the same time, we always speak to the girls through our monitoring and evaluation about the feeling of safety in all aspects of our work, be it on the field, on the bus, or with us in general. This also opens up another channel for them to express what they're going through.

We do focus group surveys for girls in the field or in the leadership and enrichment program to ask about their needs. We ask what they think should be different in the program, and what can help them become happier or fulfill more of what they want.

This is our first tier, the close relationship through the coaches. We ask them directly in focus groups, and if we find something intriguing, we have one-on-one conversations with them. We always reflect on information we collect from girls on our programming.

Eleanore Catolico: What have you heard so far about what else the girls would like to see in the program, or any additional services they'd like in the future, either with the sports component or the enrichment program?

Rima Yacoub: It's funny because they're kids. The general thing would be, "We want to learn to swim," for example. "We want to have more trips. We want more excursions." Many of them want to get some help in schooling, formal education or academic support. Some of them just want more activities, and just have more fun.

Eleanore Catolico: Is your program year-round, or is it the school schedule?

Rima Yacoub: Our year starts with the school year in September, when we run almost three months of soccer training. We break for the exams, and then during winter break, we do an outreach camp in a community or two where we do not usually work. When we start the second semester in school, we transition into the basketball season, and we also break again for exams.

We unfortunately have had to fully break for Ramadan, but next year will be the first year where we will run a couple of weeks of normal programming. It's very hard for the girls to practice normal sports with fasting. It's very tricky. We have to do a full stop in Ramadan, but this year we're doing something different. During Ramadan, we do some community play days where we bring all the girls together from different locations and have one big iftar [meal after sunset to break the daily fast] together, which is also fun. We do multiple iftars during the month of Ramadan.

After Ramadan, we resume and transition into the frisbee season, Ultimate Frisbee, and then break for exams. When the summer break starts, we also start summer camps for our four hub sites, and we also introduce more outreach camps for communities where we do not usually work. It's a year-round program. For the main program in the four hub sites, we have 20 coaches on the ground and 500 girls committed to the program.

Eleanore Catolico: Are the coaches from within the community?

Rima Yacoub: Yes, from the same neighborhoods where we operate. Amman is one hub site, one of our oldest, in four neighborhoods. One community, Jabal Amman, is the hub for the Sudanese, Somali, and Yemeni populations. Another community has more Iraqis and Jordanians, and two other communities have more Jordanians and Syrians.

From each of these neighborhoods, we have one coach, and five coaches per hub site. She is responsible for recruiting girls from her neighborhood, picking them up, dropping them off, and constant communication with parents and guardians, ensuring that they are safe on the bus and on the field. Once we bring girls from different neighborhoods to the main training area, this is where diversity happens. We bring people from different schools, backgrounds and functionalities to one training circle.

This is why, for example, in Amman, where we have four different neighborhoods with five coaches from these neighborhoods, we do not operate in a neighborhood without having a coach from that specific neighborhood. She has to be the first on the bus, and the last to leave. We work with bus drivers who have worked with us for many years. We know them very well and trust them very much, but again, we cannot ignore that we are working in conservative communities. We need to make sure that there is a woman, not only a man, on the bus so the family feels that, yes, our girls are safe.

Eleanore Catolico: All right. It was lovely learning about your work.

Rima Yacoub: Thank you so much.

Eleanore Catolico is a freelance journalist, writer and editor based in Michigan. Her solutions journalism has focused on initiatives in K-12 schools that address trauma, cultivate affirming and inclusive spaces and foster healthy peer connections.

** This interview has been edited and condensed.*