

**Read with Me: Acceptance Speech by Zohreh Ghaeni, IBBY-Asahi Award Ceremony,
August 2016, Auckland, New Zealand**

*Do you hear the children weeping?
the young birds are chirping in the nest;*

....

*The young flowers are blowing toward the west—
But the young, young children,
They are weeping bitterly!*

....

*Do you question the young children in the sorrow?
Why their tears are falling so?*

(The Cry of the Children, Elizabeth Barrett Browning)

*“The history of childhood is a nightmare from which we have only recently begun to awaken.
The further back in history one goes, the lower the level of child care and the more likely
children were to be killed, abandoned, beaten, terrorized and sexually abused.”*

Lloyd deMause, American psycho-historian wrote these words on the horrors of childhood throughout history, four decades ago.

But what about today? Are we standing at a point very far from those horrors and disasters?

Today our world is struggling with a bitter issue: immigration.

Refugees, spill across borders seeking shelter not just in Asia , the Middle East or the US/Mexican border, but everywhere: France, the Netherlands, Germany, Greece, and Poland. No nation has been untouched.

We’ve all seen images of immigrant children in the camps without a home, enough food or access to education. Many of you are involved intimately with this recent crisis.

These immigrant children we see on our screens are experiencing a complex trauma far greater than the adults in their world.

They experience war, violence, homeless, starvation, illness, the death of loved ones. If they are lucky, these children will live through dislocation, and terror. Their world is going to be an unsafe place for them to live.

Is there any rescue from this misery and injustice? As individuals, we cannot stop the wars and change the political landscape.

But we *can* act as an umbrella to protect these children so they don’t lose hope.

Without hope, all is lost.

It doesn't take a grand act to make these children's lives a little better.

Maybe reading promotion projects could be the most accessible and effective way to reduce and calm down the anger, anxiety and stress of these children.

We can give them the tools to protect themselves and solve their problems. We can reinforce their creativity to find the best solution when they are surrounded by their difficulties. We can empower them to cope with problems.

We can teach them how to comfort themselves when they are upset.

Then for such a tremendous responsibility, we need a very flexible, well-structured and thoughtful plan. We need a well-designed and effective programme to be adaptable, expandable and sustainable.

Let's speak about our experience with Read with Me in Iran:

In our deprived regions, where in the border villages most of the families are poor and unemployed, many of them are involved in drug trafficking and their children experience neglect, abuse and violence. These children need much more than access to books.

They need to be read to and share quality books, they need to speak about their stories and their lives, and

they need to be able to construct a fantasy world much more beautiful than the world around them:

"That very night... a forest grew and grew until the walls became the world all around ."
(Where the Wild Things Are: Maurice Sendak)

They need to be healed of their injuries through books, when they share how to heal the broken wing:

"No one saw the bird fall. In a city full of hurried people, only young Will notices the bird lying hurt on the ground." (How to Heal a Broken Wing: Bob Graham)

They need to be prepared to face big and serious problems like loved illness and death....

I asked mam: "will I die?"

Mam said: "One day, yes, but not now!"

Does it painful?

Everything goes quiet. Dying is like falling asleep, like a dream. But beyond the dream!

(Bigger than a Dream: Jef Aerts)

They need to language skills where bilingual children are not exposed to official academic language before the age of seven year when they start school. Children who are not exposed to Farsi in their daily lives, face many problems when they begin first grade and must read and write in Farsi, our official language. It is only through literature, where they connect with stories and their meanings and concepts, that these kids can get the language skills they need for school.

So,

Based on this reality, the Institute developed the “Read with Me” project aiming to make a meaningful change in the lives of deprived children through books and reading.

We’ve traveled hundreds, sometimes thousands of kilometers, to reach children to help them develop phonological and phonemic awareness through stories, rhymes, drama, fun and play.

We assist the street and working children in keeping them away from violence and crime, by reading books and reconstructing their worlds through drama.

We’ve crisscrossed Iran to change the gray, cold and barren walls of our children’s classrooms to colorful and literacy-rich environments.

In the beginning we were very worried about teachers’ contributions in remote areas, where it was expected that teachers are unmotivated and ineffective in their classes. We knew the most critical part of our program, and our biggest challenge would be the teachers. But after years of experience, we have found that when there is a proper foundation and the teachers are motivated and trained, a miracle happens.

So many talented and creative young teachers have been recognized, even in very remote regions. Their passion and commitment to their work is unbelievable.

Another achievement of this project was attracting and managing financial sponsorship. Financial sponsors in the private sector are mostly interested in building schools. Although building schools in deprived areas is very important, building an alternative education system based on literature and creative material and activities is an urgent need for children who cannot achieve literacy through the formal education system.

It is very difficult to convince this part of society to finance learning through modern methods.

With its extended scale and multi-layered programme, “Read with me” couldn’t reach many children in deprived areas if it couldn’t absorb and manage sponsorships.

This project is a valuable experience not because it promotes reading among a certain group of children when it reaches a fraction of the kids in need. It is valuable because it presents a model. It shows that it is not impossible or even very tough if we want to have an impact on children’s lives.

We read quality books for children to open a window to hope, peace and friendship for them.

We read quality books to children who have no shoes to wear. But we believe more than even shoes for running on the ground they need wings to fly. To fly, to depart from their pains and sorrow.

Dear colleagues and friends,

On behalf of my colleagues in Iran and on behalf of all teachers who share Read with Me with the children of remote and deprived areas,

I would like to thank IBBY for its support since the beginning of this project in Iran.

I would like to thank the IBBY-Asahi Reading Promotion Award Jury for seeing this effort in this part of the world.

And I would like to thank the Asahi Shimbun newspaper company in Japan for their sponsorship of this prestigious award, which is the only international recognition of reading promotion projects in deprived areas of the world.

And I would like to thank all of you for listening my words tonight.

Thank you!