

MALTA MIDWIVES' ASSOCIATION CONFERENCE

16th March 2023

Title: Compassion Science Empowerment in Midwifery and Perinatal Care

Duration: 10 minutes

Audience: Midwives, health care professionals and doctors

I would like to thank Ms Pauline Fenech, President of the Malta Midwives Association, for inviting me to address this conference.

I commend, the Association for organising this annual conference, but especially, for the choice of the focus of the conference, that is explicitly shown in the title '**Compassion Science Empowerment in Midwifery and Perinatal Care**'.

In my opinion, the title depicts the human element of midwifery at such a beautiful and precious moment of life, both for the mother and the child being born.

In preparing for my intervention today, I came across a quote by Ina May Gaskin that explains the essence of midwifery, which says that:

“A midwife must constantly make an effort to stay compassionate . . . for love and compassion and spiritual vision are the most important tools of the trade”.

The Lancet Series specifically identifies compassion as an integral value of the midwifery profession and describes it as: '***skilled, knowledgeable and compassionate care for childbearing women, new-born infants and families...***'

On the other hand, the United Nations Agenda 2030, and the Sustainable Development Goals, specifically SDG 3 target 2, states that by 2030, countries should end preventable deaths of new-borns and children under 5 years of age, with all countries aiming to reduce neonatal mortality to at least as low as 12 per 1,000 live births and under-5 mortality to at least as low as 25 per 1,000 live births.

Yet the health and wellbeing of every child goes beyond life and death.

The health and wellbeing of every child is determined by a myriad of circumstances that surround the child even before it is born.

A child's experience in its early life sets the foundation for the entire life course. A child's early physical, social, emotional and language development, strongly influences outcomes all through its life.

As a passionate advocate for the wellbeing children, I too believe that the prospects of a child's wellbeing is moulded from the very beginning of life.

I will take the opportunity to highlight and discuss a few examples.

I consider mental and emotional health as an important social determinant for the wellbeing of children, which needs to be at the heart of all policies that determine the lives of our children.

Evidence suggests that childhood mental health challenges are becoming more common, even more so following the COVID-19 pandemic.

Perinatal mental health is considered as a silent pandemic as we are becoming more aware of the intergenerational impact of common perinatal mental disorders.

Perinatal Mental Health problems are now also considered to be a major public health concern with considerable social and economic costs to society, and which leave a devastating impact on women and their families.

Several studies show that a mother's mental health during pregnancy and the first year, is of utmost importance, not only for the physical and mental health, but also, to the cognitive, social, and emotional development of the child.

From my very own experience, I have witnessed first-hand, families who have suffered because of peripartum mental health issues, where the children experienced late cognitive development, fell back in their education, and as a consequence, could not secure a living income to sustain themselves and their families.

Research shows that early detection and timely intervention, with peripartum mental health screening is the best practice.

I consider peripartum mental health screening as a crucial tool. It is essential for the prevention of the consequences of peripartum mental health.

Peripartum mental health screening offers a window of opportunity in the prevention of poverty, and all the consequences that poverty creates.

Such early screening can prevent many problems to the child's development and behaviour which affect its educational achievement and social interaction.

Addressing such problems later in life, say by the time a child reaches school age, may be too late.

Similarly, intimate partner violence within the home significantly influences a child's physical and mental health and well-being.

Data shows that more than 30% of domestic abuse begins during pregnancy, leaving a significant impact on the woman and her unborn baby's physical and emotional health.

As you may be aware, exposure to intimate partner violence during pregnancy is associated with low birth weight and pre-term delivery. After birth and in early childhood, violence is associated with long-term consequences on social and emotional development, together with child ill treatment which normally would ensue.

Studies show that poverty and deprivation in childhood can mark children for the rest of their lives; undermine a child's health, educational attainment, and prospects for future income, as well as the child's ability to thrive in adulthood.

We need to acknowledge that unfortunately, such a situation is present in our country too.

Data from the National Office of Statistics shows that the child poverty rate in Malta is 23.2%, which is similar to data from other countries in Europe.

The negative impact of poverty on children most of the time, starts before birth and accumulates across the life course.

Poverty impact children's health.

It impacts, the social, emotional and cognitive development, and subsequently the behaviour and educational outcomes of the child.

Children born into poverty are more likely to experience a wide range of health problems, including poor nutrition, chronic disease, and also mental health difficulties problems.

Yet, we all know that early developmental opportunities can provide a foundation for children's academic success, health, and general well-being.

In response to this situation, in 2015 the European Parliament approved the creation of a European Child Guarantee, while in June 2021, the Council of the European Union, approved setting up and the necessary funds for its implementation.

The European Child Guarantee aims at ensuring that every child in Europe, who is at risk of poverty and social exclusion, has access to the most basic rights. It identifies, early childhood development, healthcare, education, and housing as key pillars in a child's life.

The Child Guarantee aims at investing in Children to break the cycles of disadvantage.

In my opinion, as midwives and other health professionals, you play a central role in building the foundations of a healthy society. You are the best placed experts, professionals, and practitioners that are able to acknowledge the preliminary holistic assessment of the mother and her baby. You are best placed in identifying not only pregnancy-related health needs but also several other circumstances that have a direct bearing on the wellbeing of the mother and the child.

It is well known, that the holistic health of every mother and child is essential to ensure the wellbeing of all of society, and it is a direct and needed investment in the wellbeing and resilience of our communities.

I will end my contribution with a quote by Sheila Kitzinger, the British author who inspiringly said this about the midwifery profession:

“In all cultures, the midwife’s place is on the threshold of life, where intense human emotions, fear, hope, longing, triumph, and incredible physical power enable a new human being to emerge. Her vocation is unique.”

Yes, your vocation is unique.

Your vocation provides the gateway to dignified lives, strong families, and resilient communities.

Finally, I augur you much satisfaction in your unique profession, and health and serenity in your personal lives.

I wish you a successful conference.

