

Kaylin Suacci

Professor Name

Oxford Scholars

19 November 2025

Peace and Empowerment: Ilona Maher

Peace is often seen as the absence of conflict, but it truly begins in the mind, body, and soul. It stems from self-confidence, empathy, and the creation of harmony in our communities. Last summer, as a camp counselor, I met Ele, who was upset after another camper told her she wasn't as good as the others. We went to the swings, but both were taken. When one girl hopped off, Ele hesitated, unsure if she could ask to use it. She wanted me to ask for her, but I encouraged her to try herself. Nervously, she practiced what to say, then walked over. This moment reflects the larger struggle of finding peace in a world that too often embraces judgment, pressure, and comparison. I watched as Ele kindly spoke to the girl. Ele then turned back and, in seconds, was beaming as she swung, kicking her legs in the air. Her joy reflected the confidence she'd built. Watching her sense of belonging grow made me realize that peace is an active state. It is built through encouragement, understanding, and creating spaces where people feel valued. Peace is cultivated by empowering others to be confident in themselves.

Empowering others builds a foundation for peace within individuals and communities. Ilona Maher, an Olympic rugby player and body positivity advocate, embodies this by challenging rigid ideas around femininity and mentoring young women. Her work demonstrates that peace is not passive, but it is cultivated through empowerment and action. Maher

understands that peace on a larger scale is attainable by combining confidence, courage, and empathy. Yet, it is necessary to develop these alongside helping others do so as well.

Understanding that confidence evolves is essential to finding peace in one's life. It isn't a fixed state, but a living concept. It can be broken, mended, and redefined through every experience. Inner peace allows individuals to respond thoughtfully to challenges, listen empathetically, and support their communities. Maher exemplifies this principle by demonstrating that peace is cultivated through authenticity and encouragement. By challenging societal expectations of the female body and athleticism, Maher creates spaces where self-love and resilience are normalized. She illustrates that empowerment is an essential component of active peace.

As a young athlete who once questioned whether my own muscularity fit traditional ideas of femininity, I understand the courage it takes to embrace strength as a young woman. Ilona Maher embodies this courage through rugby, a traditionally male-dominated sport, which demands physical power, strategy, and resilience. Maher's success in the sport challenges outdated notions of what women "should" look like or how they "should" behave. Her muscularity and skill demonstrate that strength and femininity coexist wonderfully, expanding the cultural understanding of female capability. Our society's obsession with image and perfection undermines inner peace. Confidence is one of the hardest forms of peace to achieve. By openly sharing her struggles with body image and her journey toward self-acceptance, Maher models inner peace achieved through self-love and authenticity (Fleming). Her example encourages young women to embrace their bodies for what they can do, rather than how they appear, cultivating confidence that supports both personal and social harmony. Sarah Barnett, an

Olympic lifter I once interviewed for a research project, embodies the same idea: athletes must focus on what their bodies can do rather than how they look.

Empowering youth is a major aspect of Maher's mission. Through social media, public appearances, and direct mentorship, she provides guidance and reassurance to young women navigating societal pressures. One notable example is her response to a nine-year-old fan who wrote about body image anxiety. Maher shared a personal video affirming the girl's physical strength and resilience, demonstrating that bodies are valuable for their function, not just appearance (Yee). This act of empowerment nurtured confidence, reduced self-doubt, and promoted a sense of inner peace for the fan. Through a nonprofit youth empowerment program called Free To Be, I've seen firsthand how sharing personal stories about confidence and friendship can help younger students find courage in themselves. Maher's work demonstrates that supporting others' authentic identities is a peaceful act and boosts harmony within communities.

Maher extends her message of peace through empowerment far beyond the rugby field through social media and advocacy. Rather than presenting a polished or idealized image, she shares moments of vulnerability and humor. These allow others to see the humanity behind her top-tier athleticism. By addressing topics such as mental health, gender equity, and body image, she has built a platform with a foundation in empathy and understanding (NCAA.org). By excelling in rugby and sharing authentic experiences online, Maher redefines strength and shows that peace is both internal and social. It is rooted in compassion, confidence, and self-respect (Shimits).

Maher's influence reveals how individual empowerment can lead to collective peace. Every young woman encouraged to embrace her strength or reject self-doubt contributes to a broader culture of confidence and acceptance. Her mentorship of youth, responses to fans, and public transparency model how compassion leads to empowerment. She shows that peace grows when people lift one another. My own work mentoring youth reflects these same principles: encouraging hesitant students or guiding them to voice their confidence mirrors Maher's belief that peace begins when one person helps another find strength within themselves. Both experiences show that empowerment is not a one-time act but a continuous exchange of encouragement and trust. Maher's goal is for young women to grow up feeling enough, just as they are. Her real impact isn't in medals, but in the confidence and peace she inspires.

Works Cited

- Fleming, Whitney. "Dear Ilona Maher: Thanks for Teaching Teen Girls (and Moms) about Body Positivity." *Parentingteensandtweens.com*, 7 Aug. 2024, parentingteensandtweens.com/dear-ilona-maher-thanks-for-teaching-teen-girls-and-moms-about-body-positivity/.
- NCAA.org. "Quinnipiac Rugby Alum Ilona Maher Promoting Body Positivity through Olympic Platform." *NCAA.org*, NCAA.org, 16 May 2024, www.ncaa.org/news/2024/5/16/olympics-quinnipiac-rugby-alum-ilona-maher-promoting-body-positivity-through-olympic-platform.aspx.
- Shimits, Arianna . "Ilona Maher: Redefining the Culture of Women's Sports." *Persistencepsych.com*, 2022, www.persistencepsych.com/ilona-maher-redefining-the-culture-of-women-s-sports.
- Yee, Lawrence. "Olympian Ilona Maher's Message about Body Positivity to 9-Year-Old Fan Goes Viral (Exclusive)." *People.com*, 2024, people.com/ilona-maher-social-media-video-body-positivity-9-year-old-girl-georgia-sullivan-8692312.