

Check against Delivery



**7<sup>th</sup> International Dialogue on Population  
and Development**

**Exploring Cultural Diversity and Gender  
Equality: Towards universal access to  
Sexual and reproductive health and rights**

**Opening Address by  
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**16 October 2008  
Berlin**

Your Excellencies,  
Esteemed Colleagues,  
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is my pleasure to join you today in Berlin for the 7<sup>th</sup> International Dialogue on Population and Development.

I have participated in several of these dialogues and appreciate the exchange of ideas and sharing of experiences that take place. I would like to thank the Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development, and in particular Minister Wieczorek-Zeul, as well as its partners, for organizing this meeting and bringing us together today.

I am honoured to address you because I have been asked to speak about a topic that I care deeply about. I will speak about the relationship between culture and development and how it relates to gender equality and the right to sexual and reproductive health.

As an Under-Secretary-General of the United Nations and as a person who has had the opportunity to traverse many cultures, I am adamant about cultural awareness and engagement as a vehicle to promote human rights and thus achieve development goals.

The great scholar and author, Amartya Sen, famous for his expansion of the term development to include the 'human' element, maintained in his treatise on 'Culture and Development' that cultural matters are integral parts of the lives we lead. "If development can be seen as enhancement of our living standards," he said, "then efforts geared to development can hardly ignore the world of culture."

The European Agenda for Culture in a Globalizing World (2007) describes culture as lying at the heart of human development and civilization. It says, "Culture is what makes people hope and dream, by stimulating our senses and offering new ways of looking at reality. It is what brings people together, by stirring dialogue and arousing passions, in a way that unites rather than divides."

Yet we all know that our world is filled with perceived cultural divides and that some people believe that their culture is better than others.

The point that I would like to stress today is that while we may disagree with certain practices, all cultures are unique and valuable and represent the diversity of human life. People are both shaped by and actively shape their own cultures. And people in the same culture do not all think the same way. We also know that culture is not static; culture is dynamic and constantly changing.

In all cultures, people are critical agents of change and if we are serious about eradicating poverty, promoting the human rights of women, including the right to health, and in particular sexual and reproductive health, then we have to work with this range of agents of change and support cultural change from within.

This is simply a practical, common sense way to achieve greater progress in promoting the agenda of the International Conference on Population and Development, and achieving the Millennium Development Goals. All of us working in the field of population and development have been engaging with culture for years.

At UNFPA we have learned from nearly four decades of experience that population issues come down to the decisions that people can or cannot make. Whether it is a decision about using contraception, or sending a daughter to school, or seeking healthcare during pregnancy or childbirth, or packing up and moving to a city or another country, the decisions that people make, or cannot make, are deeply rooted in their specific cultural contexts.

Our data show that reproductive health eludes many of the world's poorest people. And this is due not only to a lack of health services, but also to cultural factors that manifest in an inability to access the services even when they are available, as well as inadequate levels of knowledge of sexual behaviour, social practices that discriminate against women and girls, and the limited power many women and girls have over their sexual and reproductive lives.

We are aware that those who promote women's empowerment and the right to sexual and reproductive health often have to deal with criticism, suspicion and accusations of challenging either religion, culture or tradition – or all of them.

We also know that discriminatory attitudes towards women and harmful practices, such as child marriage, sex-selection/male preference, and female genital mutilation/cutting, are deeply rooted within cultural understandings and are often stronger than the laws that have been enacted to stop them.

Consequently, UNFPA has learned that to get to the root of these issues, it is necessary to use a 'cultural lens' - to ensure a culturally sensitive approach to facilitate change. Such an approach is based on the principle of mutual respect and grounded in a process of active listening and dialogue. It seeks solutions from within, based on knowledge, insights and expertise.

A culturally sensitive approach is one that takes into account, from the outset, the broad political, economic, and legal frameworks within which human behavior and action take place. In other words, far from being an 'add-on' to development work, cultural sensitivity integrates a width of perspective, a depth of insight, and a deeply rooted outreach. Cultural sensitivity, effectively, refines and strengthens the way we do development.

I will argue today that this approach to actively engage cultures is vital not only for the promotion of a rights-based development, it is essential for aid to be appropriate, effective and facilitating sustainable results.

In today's world, we are challenged to increase our cultural 'fluency'. In this new aid environment, greater flexibility and innovation and the skills for relationship

building, such as language and broader cultural understanding, are required more than ever. Internally, within our organizations, we have to adapt to dynamic and ever changing ways of doing our work, based on introspection and learning, partnership and mutual respect.

At UNFPA we have learned that it is better to understand culture and identify its positive elements to facilitate lasting change. This is not to say that violations of human rights should go unchallenged. On the contrary. The advantage of culturally sensitive approaches is that they provide insights on how to align cultural practices and human rights most effectively.

We have found this to be true in tackling such challenges as female genital mutilation and cutting, in addressing violence against women including domestic abuse and honour killings, and in working with partners to end prenatal sex selection in Asian countries where an estimated 100 million girls are missing due to a preference for sons.

In understanding the nexus of development, culture, gender and human rights, we are conscious of at least two levels: the national policy and governance level representing the top-down promotion of human rights through legislation; and the popular level of civil society, where developing a 'culture of human rights' is evolving from the bottom-up.

To promote and protect human rights, both levels and kinds of partnerships are needed and neither is sufficient on its own. Whether it is to end female genital mutilation and cutting, or to counter son preference in families that may lead to eliminating the female fetus, or to combat the spread of HIV and AIDS, laws are important and necessary, but in and of themselves are not enough to generate changes in attitudes and behaviour.

The practice of female genital mutilation/cutting for instance, is deeply rooted and often considered by families, especially mothers, and community members to be essential for full entry into adulthood and membership in the community; women without it may be considered unfit for marriage, ugly and unclean.

Ending the practice involves taking all the different cultural meanings into account and finding meaningful alternatives in close cooperation and discussion with the community. In countries such as Senegal and Guinea Bissau, people are encouraged to talk about concerns in this area and to review problem-solving approaches. This process of engagement often culminates with a collective decision to abandon female genital mutilation. In some instances, such as in Kenya and Uganda, the symbolic value of the practice is maintained and celebrated as a rite of passage to adulthood, without the cutting.

I am pleased to announce that this year's State of World Report, which we will release next month on November 12th, focuses on many of these issues and is entitled, *Reaching Common Ground: Culture, Gender and Human Rights*. In the report, we show how some tensions often exist between universal standards of

human rights and culturally specific norms and practices – particularly when it comes to the area of gender relations. Identifying those power structures that can play a role in either perpetuating the status quo or alternatively, supporting positive change, is strategic to promoting human rights and creating local ownership and agency.

Some of the most dramatic changes occur when the guardians of cultural norms and practices become advocates for change.

In Latin America, cultural agents of change, such as community, indigenous and church leaders are instrumental in bringing about important developments, which promote women's rights and equitable gender relations.

In Brazil, UNFPA has adopted a strategy of "selective collaboration" with the Catholic Church, identifying and working together in those areas where objectives coincide, while respecting the boundaries inherent in each partner's mandate. Similarly, the passage of a groundbreaking new law in Guatemala that promotes better health for women and their families was the product of a year and a half of negotiations and consensus-building among a wide range of cultural and political stakeholders, facilitated by UNFPA.

In Yemen, we are working with the Ministry of Awqaf (religious endowment) and Religious Guidance, in helping to raise public awareness of reproductive health, including family planning, and the harmful effects of certain practices such as forced early marriage and female genital cutting. A Source Book on Reproductive Health, produced jointly by the Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Awqaf and Religious Guidance, guides muftis, imams and other religious leaders on handling sensitive topics among their followers. The Source Book relates family planning and reproductive health to the Quran, and stresses the Prophet's teachings on the equality of women and men.

In Uganda, UNFPA has successfully reached out to elders, kings, bishops and imams as opinion leaders in promoting healthier behaviors and the elimination of harmful practices. UNFPA's work in this country, which has successfully grappled with its HIV and AIDS epidemic, is a model for working within and among existing cultural dynamics.

In India, we found that to be effective in eliminating sex selection, legislation had to be complemented by an integrated broad-based awareness-raising campaign that involves opinion makers and custodians of culture. The campaign addresses the underlying cause of gender discrimination, in this case, a widespread preference for sons. The publication of research informed an understanding of prenatal sex-selection not only as a cultural issue, but one with social and economic and demographic dimensions. Given the imbalance in the sex ratio, men may face difficulties in finding wives, which may lead to increased levels of gender-based violence and human trafficking. In this case, we learned that confronting harmful practices that are national in scope can best be addressed

through a broad coalition of actors, each of whom can bring forward their own expertise in creating awareness and corrective action.

In Cambodia, Buddhist monks are prominent in the struggle to combat HIV, and the nuns play a critical role in both prevention as well as in the healing necessary for those infected and affected by the disease. Since culture has a role to play in defining gender relations and sexual behavior, both of which are factors in HIV transmission, and socialization is an important dynamic in the spread of stigma, it follows that prevention and care require a culturally sensitive approach.

Based on our work in the field, we have found that faith-based organizations provide anywhere between 40 to 60 per cent of health-related services in some countries. This is simultaneously a statement of vast outreach, capacity, and legitimacy. In other words, this is an undeniable form of power. UNFPA has a legacy of working with a number of these faith-based service providers for many years in several countries. Our recent mapping of such engagement across the developing world shows that we work with no less than 400 different faith-based organizations in over 100 countries.

Since 2002, we have sought to document, assess, and consolidate this range of partnerships with these strategic agents of change. In fact, after leaving this gathering, I will proceed to Istanbul to host UNFPA's first Global Forum of Faith-Based Organizations. This Forum is a consolidation of similar consultations in four regions where we listened to the diversity of experiences, challenges, and achievements of these organizations that work around our areas in maternal health, HIV prevention, women's empowerment, violence against women, and humanitarian assistance in times of conflict.

We heard their recommendations to enhance the partnership towards mutual goals of ensuring that every pregnancy is wanted, every birth is safe, every person is free of HIV and every girl and woman lives in dignity. Our goal is to establish a global interfaith network to work together with our other partners in government and civil society, for population and development issues.

In this age of advanced globalization, we are building transnational and multi-stakeholder partnerships to advance development through a human rights'-based approach, founded on cultural sensitivity. These strategic partnerships will expand the domains of support in an age of growing religiosity and extremisms of all kinds.

All of us gathered here today believe in the values that all cultures hold in common: no woman should die in childbirth; nothing should condone rape, wife beating, human trafficking or other forms of gender-based violence; and no one should suffer and die of AIDS. With this in mind, we are reaching out to partners around the globe to advance women's empowerment, gender equality, and universal access to reproductive health. We are actively engaging men and boys as partners in equality. By reaching out to all segments of the population and society, we stand a better chance of meeting our goals and achieving success.

In closing, I would like to quote the great Nigerian writer and Nobel Laureate, Wole Soyinka. He said:

'Culture is a matrix of infinite possibilities and choices. From within the same cultural matrix we can extract arguments and strategies for the degradation and ennoblement of our species, for its enslavement or liberation, for the suppression of its productive potential or its enhancement'.

For those of us working in the field of development, basing our mission on human rights and human dignity, we must start from, and work within, this realm of 'infinite possibilities'. We can succeed if we keep close to our hearts the conviction that each human life is uniquely valuable, and the right to development is the right of all individuals to express the full measure of their potential and humanity.

I thank you.