

## REACHING COMMON GROUND: CULTURE, GENDER AND HUMAN RIGHTS

(Not for release before 1200 GMT, 12 November 2008)

### Overview

As a fundamental part of people's lives, culture must be integrated into development policy and programming. *The State of World Population 2008* report from UNFPA, the United Nations Population Fund, shows how this process works in practice.

This year is the 60th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The report's starting point is that human rights reflect universal values. It calls for culturally sensitive approaches to development because they are essential for human rights in general, and women's rights in particular.

Culturally sensitive approaches call for cultural fluency – familiarity with how cultures work, and how to work with them. The report suggests that partnerships – for example between UNFPA and local non-governmental organizations (NGOs) – can create effective strategies to promote human rights, such as women's empowerment and gender equality, and end human rights abuses like female genital mutilation or cutting.

Culture influences how people manage their lives, the report says. Cultures affect how people think and act; but, they do not make everyone think and act alike. Cultures influence and are influenced by external circumstances, and they change in response. People are continually reshaping them, although some aspects of culture continue to influence choices and lifestyles for a long time.

It is risky to generalize about cultures, says the report, and it is particularly dangerous to judge one culture by the norms and values of another. Even in the same culture, not everyone agrees on norms and values – in fact, change comes about when people resist cultural pressures. The movement towards gender equality is a good example of how this works.

Cultural development is as much a right as economic or social development, says the report. Culturally sensitive approaches seek out creative solutions produced within cultures, and work with them. Culturally sensitive approaches are crucial for understanding legal, political, economic and social power relations and what they mean for development.

The report cautions that cultural sensitivity and engagement do not mean acceptance of harmful

traditional practices, or a free pass for human rights abuses – far from it. Values and practices that infringe human rights can be found in all cultures. Embracing cultural realities can reveal the most effective ways to challenge harmful cultural practices and strengthen beneficial ones.




 state of world population 2008  
 Reaching Common Ground:  
 Culture, Gender and Human Rights

### Human Rights

In addition to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), Member States of the United Nations have adopted a wide range of human rights instruments, as well as consensus documents such as the

Programme of Action of the 1994 International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) and the Platform for Action of the Fourth World Conference on Women (1995).

*The State of World Population 2008* says that the discussion about whether human rights are truly universal has often overlooked the critical interrelationships between human rights and cultures. Human rights protect groups as well as individuals. For example, among protections for the collective rights of groups is the right to health, including reproductive health. Resistance to deprivation and oppression is common to all cultures, and people use the language of rights to express their resistance. But both

individuals and cultural groups understand universal rights in their own ways, and advocate for rights in ways that suit their cultural contexts. What the report calls “cultural legitimacy” can ingrain human rights, but acquiring this legitimacy calls for cultural knowledge and engagement.

Culturally sensitive approaches must reach all communities, including marginalized groups within communities. This is not a swift or predictable process, the report acknowledges. Human development with full realization of human rights depends on serious and respectful engagement with cultures.

### *Women’s Empowerment and Gender Equality*

Despite international agreements, including most recently the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), the report points out that gender inequality remains widespread and deeply rooted in many cultures. Women and girls are three fifths of the world’s one billion poorest people; women are two thirds of the 960 million adults in the world who cannot read, and girls are 70 per cent of the 130 million children who are out of school. Cultural norms and traditions may perpetuate gender-based violence, and both women and men can learn to turn a blind eye.

Cultural power operates through coercion, says the report. Coercion may be visible, hidden in the structures of government and the law, or ingrained in people’s own perceptions of themselves. Power relations mould gender dynamics and underlie practices such as child marriage (a leading cause of obstetric fistula and maternal death) and female genital mutilation or cutting. These and other harmful practices continue in many countries despite laws against them. Women may support them, believing that they protect their children and themselves.

Advances in gender equality have never come without cultural struggle. Women in Latin America, for example, have succeeded in making gender violence visible and in securing legislation against it; but, enforcement remains a problem.

The report points out that the UNFPA approach integrates work towards human rights and gender equality with cultural sensitivity. The approach encourages change from within, while respecting both national sovereignty and cultural integrity. UNFPA collaborates not only with governments, but with a variety of local organizations and individuals, many of whom it identifies as agents of change.

The “culture lens” is UNFPA’s tool for implementing this approach. The culture lens helps to develop the cul-

tural fluency needed for negotiating, persuading and cultivating cultural acceptance and ownership. It helps UNFPA-supported programmes respond to variations in needs, experiences and cultures; understand how people negotiate their own contexts; and learn from local resistance.

### *Reproductive Health and Rights*

The report notes that what cultures and people understand by reproductive health and rights may vary, even within a community. Cultural sensitivity is about being aware of these varied meanings, and being prepared for the unexpected: for example, some men may work for gender equality against their apparent self-interest, and some women may support practices that apparently harm them. Culturally sensitive approaches understand and work with a community’s views: for example, about what it signifies when a woman or a couple does not reproduce; the effect of contraception on a woman’s ability to conceive; or on a man’s view of what makes up his “manhood”.

Cultural sensitivity helps to mitigate and overcome cultural resistance to couples and individuals using modern contraception, says the report. It prepares the way for empowering women in particular with control over their fertility. Culturally sensitive approaches are essential tools for development organizations concerned with promoting sexual and reproductive health.

For example, most national governments, local communities and the international community at large regard female genital mutilation or cutting as a violation of human rights and a danger to physical and mental health. But it is widespread and deeply rooted in some communities. It may be considered essential for full entry into adulthood and membership of the community; women without it may be considered 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.

It is important to make alliances with opinion-makers and leaders, as well as people and organizations working in the field. Sometimes the cultural gatekeepers themselves are advocates for women’s rights. In Cambodia, Buddhist nuns and monks are prominent in the struggle against HIV and AIDS; in Zimbabwe, local leaders have taken up the challenge. Successful alliances seek broad partnerships, including for example women’s, youth and workers’ organizations which can work with and reinforce each other.

Culturally sensitive approaches are essential for reaching the MDGs, says the report, including Goal 5, to improve maternal health. The numbers of women dying as a consequence of pregnancy and childbirth are essentially unchanged since the 1980s, at about 536,000. Many times that number, between 10 and 15 million, suffer injury or illness. Lower maternal mortality, and avoiding injuries such as obstetric fistula, depends on better care in pregnancy and childbirth, emergency services in cases of complication, and access to family planning. Cultural sensitivity is essential for success in these critical initiatives.

The report recognizes that religion is central to many people's lives, influencing their most intimate decisions and actions. But the report notes that appeals to religion can be used to justify blatant human rights violations such as killing women in the name of "honour" or "crimes of passion". Cultural sensitivity entails support for women and men within the culture who oppose such practices.

Getting men involved in the design, implementation and delivery of reproductive health programmes, for instance, is a way to ensure that the programmes are culturally sensitive. Attention to men's experiences of gender and its inequalities can help overcome male resistance.

### **Poverty, Inequality and Population**

Development depends among others things on achieving population objectives, says the report. At the International Conference on Population and Development (1994), 179 Governments agreed on goals by 2015. Many of them are now incorporated in the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), including universal access to reproductive health care, universal education, the empowerment of women and gender equality.

The very poor and other marginalized communities benefit least from development policies. Their levels of education and health care are lower and their lives shorter than among the better-off. Poorer women in particular suffer from the harmful aspects of tradition and culture, with higher risks of maternal death, illness and injury.

Unequal "development" makes more people poor, and makes the already poor poorer. Low levels of health and education make it more difficult to translate any additional income into improved well-being. Access to opportunities and resources and ability to enjoy human rights depend in part on gender relations and physical capacities. The report concludes that analysing people's choices, in their local conditions and cultural contexts, is a precondition for better policies.

*The State of World Population 2008* finds that, where cultural constraints rather than poverty hold women back from using family planning, programmes can succeed even if there has been little economic development, as in Bangladesh. On the other hand, some poor women use contraception because they cannot afford children, rather than to protect their own reproductive health.

The report says the key to safer motherhood is better reproductive health, by means of: (1) access to family planning to reduce unintended pregnancies and space intended pregnancies; (2) skilled care for all births; (3) timely obstetric care for complications during childbirth; and (4) skilled care for women and babies after delivery.

The more likely it is that a woman will give birth with a skilled attendant present, the better the outcome is likely to be. Poorer women and poorer countries with fewer attended births have higher rates of maternal mortality and morbidity. But it is more than a matter of numbers, says the report. The challenge for reproductive health services is providing not only more skilled birth attendants, but also attendants who have a cultural connection with the women they serve, as well as offering culturally acceptable emergency and obstetric care backup and referral.

The report acknowledges that migration has been a mixed experience for all concerned. International migrants – some 191 million in 2005 – provide at least \$251 billion annually in remittances home. Their contribution is cultural as well as economic: Migrants pick up and transmit cultural messages, including attitudes to human rights and gender equality.

Problems for host countries include misunderstanding, discrimination and hostility towards migrants; problems for source countries include losing skilled and qualified workers, as well as family and community members. Trafficking, the dark underside of migration, damages both communities and the individuals concerned.

Internal migration produces a range of risks and opportunities, though the report notes that poor people have more of the risks and fewer of the opportunities. Urban services are better, but the poor cannot afford them. Many migrants go home to give birth, for example, despite apparently poorer-quality care.

*The State of World Population 2008* concludes that the cumulative impact of economic and social change is forcing cultures to change in response, but successful adaptation depends on understanding what is happening and responding to it.

## Gender and Reproductive Health in Conflict Situations

Women's position as "guardians of culture" often makes them a target in war. Rape is violence aimed not only at a woman, but at her whole culture. The woman suffers doubly, says the report: Communities may view her as tainted or worthless and she may suffer further violence as a result.

Militarization of a culture makes violence more likely and more acceptable, holding women back from empowerment and equality. At the same time, they bear additional responsibilities and costs, such as acting as heads of household in the absence of men. Men who feel that they have failed in their duty to protect their families may become resentful and violent.

Security Council resolution 1325 (2000) accepts that women's human rights are an international security concern. Despite concerns about what is missing from the Council resolution, it recognizes critical policy gaps and calls for change.

The report emphasizes that development and humanitarian assistance must be sensitive to the stresses brought on by armed conflict. Culturally sensitive approaches aim to protect whatever progress women have made towards gender equality, including reproductive health and rights. They may also be able to protect women from violence and help men to avoid using it.

Describing women as victims and men as aggressors ignores the variety of responsibilities that women take in wartime, as heads of household, breadwinners, caregivers and combatants. Policies and approaches must recognize people's resilience and resourcefulness, and what has changed as a result of conflict, says the report. Failure to do so may exclude women and minorities, including

people with disabilities, from involvement in setting post-conflict priorities and development strategies.

Culturally sensitive approaches are also needed for people coping with trauma; meeting refugees' needs for sexual and reproductive health care; building partnerships with local organizations and helping people retain or recover their sense of cultural identity amid the ravages of war.

## Conclusions

- International development actors ignore or marginalize culture at their peril. Advancing human rights requires an appreciation of the complexity, fluidity and centrality of culture by identifying and partnering with local agents of change.
- Approaches based on cultural knowledge provide viability to policymaking – and enable the "cultural politics" required for human rights.
- Cultural fluency determines how systems of meanings, economic and political opposition, or supportive policies develop – and can be developed.
- To develop cultural fluency, UNFPA proposes a "culture lens" as a programming tool.
- Culturally sensitive approaches investigate how variables such as economic status, politics, law, class, age, gender, religion and ethnicity intersect and lead to divergent understandings and manifestations of power.
- Culturally sensitive approaches call for different analytical and operational frameworks, and for introspection among the development community.

Word Count: 2,449

### For more information contact

United Nations Population Fund  
Information and External Relations Division  
220 East 42nd Street, New York, NY 10017  
Tel: + 1 212 297 5020; Fax: + 1 212 557 6416  
E-mail: gharzeddine@unfpa.org

The full report and this summary, in Arabic, English, French, Russian and Spanish, may be found on the UNFPA website, [www.unfpa.org](http://www.unfpa.org), along with news features.