

Statement of Thoraya Ahmed Obaid
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Fund
Launch of *The State of World Population 2008*

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Thank you for joining us today. It is a pleasure, once again, to be in London to launch *The State of World Population 2008* report from UNFPA, the United Nations Population Fund. I am also pleased to share with you the youth supplement, *Generation of Change: Young People and Culture*, which features great stories from young people around the world.

Our 2008 report is called, *Reaching Common Ground: Culture, Gender and Human Rights*.

This report is a call to action to increase cultural knowledge, awareness and engagement in efforts to promote development and human rights, especially the rights of women.

At UNFPA, we promote gender equality and reproductive health, and that is the focus of this report.

Culture is the way we think, act and believe. And values and practices that infringe human rights can be found in all cultures—all cultures.

We know that cultural traditions and beliefs are often stronger than laws. We have seen this in our work to end female genital mutilation or cutting and child marriage. In many countries, these practices are illegal—they are against the law—and yet, they persist. They persist because they are deeply rooted within the culture.

And we have found that if we want to make greater progress, we have to engage at a deeper level to facilitate change in the lives of individuals, families and communities. We call it being culturally sensitive.

Human rights are everybody's work and being culturally sensitive and understanding the context is everybody's business.

Cultural sensitivity and engagement do not mean acceptance of harmful traditional practices, or a free pass for human rights abuses—far from it.

Understanding cultural realities can reveal the most effective ways to challenge harmful practices and promote human rights.

One of the main messages of this report is that change cannot be imposed from the outside; to be lasting, change must come from within.

Culture is created by people, and people can change culture. Communities have to look at their cultural values and practices and determine whether they impede or promote the realization of human rights. Then, they can build on the positive and change the negative.

There are positive and negative currents in every culture. There are people within every culture who oppose harmful cultural practices and violations of human rights.

As development workers, we have to partner with forces of positive cultural change to protect human rights and human well-being. Our experience shows that we can work closely with these positive forces for cultural change to protect human rights.

We see this clearly in the case of female genital mutilation or cutting. This harmful practice carries significant cultural meaning—it is seen as part of a girl's transition to womanhood. Today, we are working with community leaders to keep the celebratory aspects of the tradition and remove the harmful aspect of cutting.

And we have to change the culture *within* our own development organizations. We have to take a more participatory, inclusive approach. We have to listen to people. They know what they need and we have to support them.

In this report, we dismiss the assumption that culture is only an obstacle to the realization of human rights. Culture is not a wall to tear down. It is a window to see through, a door to open to make greater progress for human rights.

In conclusion, I would like to stress that what happens to the lives of women, men and young people will shape our common future. Now is the time to begin a concerted international effort for *Reaching Common Ground*, as the title of this year's report suggests.

I will now take questions from representatives of the media. Please state your name and organization.