

**United Nations Population Award  
Acceptance statement**

**Professor Mahmoud F. Fathalla  
June 1, 2009**

Chairman of the Committee for the United Nations Population Award,  
Secretary-General of the United Nations,  
Excellencies,  
Distinguished Guests,  
Friends:

I deeply appreciate the honor of joining a long list of distinguished laureates of the United Nations Population Award. I am humbled by the selection knowing that there are many others who richly deserve the award. I am honored to be a co-awardee with Movimiento Communal Nicaraguense. Beyond academia, my other love has been civil society organizations with whom I was privileged to work, and whose work I appreciate and admire.

I pay my respects and I express my admiration to UNFPA and its capable and dedicated leadership. Thanks to age, I have witnessed the development and progress of the fund almost from the beginning. I have seen how its activities expanded and evolved. I shared in the distress and sorrow at times when the fund was denied resources badly needed to make a difference in the lives of poor women and children around the world.

One of the fascinating things about the population field is that it is accessed through several doors: doors of demography, development, environment, health, human rights and others. Once they are inside the field, this diverse population community has its agreements and also its differences. But they all share one thing in common: a sense of global consciousness and global

responsibility, fostered by the realization that we, all, are travelers together on board of one fragile spaceship, our little earth cruising in a vast universe. Whatever happens in lower deck or in upper deck of this spaceship is a concern for all of us. We share a common destiny.

I entered the population field through the door of women's health and rights. From my early professional career, I was privileged to serve the health needs of women in a community in which people are mostly poor and women are the poorest of the poor. I saw how women cope in a life that does not treat them fairly or well. I saw how heavy dust, accumulated through many dark centuries, has obscured the beautiful face of a woman- friendly culture, and reversed the progress of what was a great religious- inspired women liberation movement. As a health professional, I came to the conviction that powerlessness of women is a serious health hazard. When I moved into the international field, I realized that powerlessness of women is much more pervasive, and that women in different countries have more in common than what meets the eye.

With the mounting international concern about population growth, I tried to look at the issues through a borrowed woman's lens. What I saw was that the world was paying a heavy penalty for subordination of women. Women, in a sense, have been coerced into motherhood by denying them not only the power and the means to control and regulate their fertility, but also by denying them choices in life apart from childbearing and childrearing. When women are empowered to make choices, even the poor and illiterate women, whom I know best, will make the right choices for themselves, for their families, for their communities, for their countries and for the world at large.

With concerns about population growth, the world had to realize that time was overdue to correct long standing injustices to women

and to let the woman finally emerge from behind the mother. The Cairo International Conference on Population and Development in 1994 put the population movement on the right track, shifted the focus from “counting the people” to “the people count”, with women at the centre as ends and not as means, and with family planning in the right place within the broader spectrum and totality of sexual and reproductive health and rights. Credit for this paradigm shift must go to UNFPA and to the tireless campaigning of the women’s health and rights movement.

At the end of a long career as a health professional, as a scientist, and as an advocate for women’s health and rights, I can look back with some satisfaction. Progress has been made and is being made. True, women in many parts of the world, including the region that I know best, still have some steep mountains to climb. But women are not for turning. My generation is now handing over the torch, and with it an unfinished agenda. A long to-do list is still pending, to shape a world that women deserve:

- a world that treats women fairly and well, throughout their life course, as children, as adolescents, as young adults and as mature adults;

- a world in which the girl child is her brother’s equal in worth and in care, and, never again, will have her genitalia mutilated;

- a world in which the adolescent girl will be seen as an asset for a good investment in our future;

- a world in which no woman will have to risk her health and life because of an unwanted pregnancy, and in which women will be able to enjoy mutually fulfilling sexual relationships while capable of protecting themselves from disease;

- a world that will shed the shame, disgrace and the scandal of leaving mothers to suffer and die when they are fulfilling the noble task for survival of our species;

- a world in which mothers will get a successful return on their major reproductive investment, in terms of child survival and healthy growth and development;

- a world in which men everywhere will say NO to violence against women in all its ugly forms; and

- a world in which the ageing woman will get the esteem she deserves for all what she has contributed, and will get the recognition that she is an asset to her community, not a vulnerability.

This is the world that women deserve. This is the world I dream for my two little grand daughters and their sisters around the world, a world full of choices. The population community of doers and donors, helped by UNFPA, should, can and I hope will help make it happen.