



3

Negotiating Culture: Promoting Gender Equality and Empowering Women¹

Cultures are neither static nor monolithic.... They adapt to new opportunities and challenges and evolving realities. What is seen as “the culture” may in fact be a viewpoint held by a small group of elites keen to hold onto their power and status. The tensions and diverging goals inherent in every culture create opportunities for UNFPA to promote human rights and gender equality, particularly when UNFPA can partner with local agents of social change and challenge dominant views from within the same cultural frame of reference.²

At the first United Nations World Conference on Women in Mexico City in 1975, governments, civil society and United Nations bodies committed themselves to work with and for women. Work continued throughout the United Nations Decade for Women, 1976 to 1985. The United Nations General Assembly adopted the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) in 1979. CEDAW established an agenda for national action to end discrimination and promote equality between men and women. It defined discrimination as “any distinction, exclusion or restriction made on the basis of sex which has the effect or purpose of impairing or nullifying the recognition, enjoyment or exercise by women, irrespective of their marital status, on a basis of equality of men and women, of human rights and fundamental freedoms in the political, economic, social, cultural, civil or any other field.”

Equality between women and men was one of the major themes of subsequent World Conferences on Women. The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (1995) explicitly linked gender equality with women’s empowerment:

Women’s empowerment and their full participation on the basis of equality in all spheres of society, including participation in the decision-making process and access to power, are fundamental for the achievement of equality, development and peace.

◀ As cultures change, gender roles, responsibilities and relationships change too. This young man in Côte d’Ivoire is learning to sew in a mixed class of women and men.

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The Beijing Platform for Action maintains that similarities and differences between women and men should be recognized and equally valued, and that women and men should enjoy equal status; recognition and consideration; equal conditions “to realize their full potential and ambitions”; equal “opportunities to participate in, contribute to, and benefit from society’s resources and development”; equal “freedoms and quality of life”; and equal “outcomes in all aspects of life”.³

*Gender equality is, first and foremost, a human right. Women are entitled to live in dignity and in freedom from want and from fear. Empowering women is also an indispensable tool for advancing development and reducing poverty.*⁴

For Beijing+5 in June 2000, governments – with involvement from the United Nations, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and regional organizations – reviewed progress on women’s empowerment and gender equality since 1995. National reports found significant changes in the status of women since 1976; for example, more women were involved in the labour force and were major actors in civil society. Governments credited NGOs and women’s organizations with advancing concerns about women and gender equality. However, reports from all regions also noted that violence and poverty compromised gender equality. Globalization presented new challenges, with increasing “trafficking in women and girls, the changing nature of armed conflict, the growing gap between nations and genders, and the detachment of macroeconomic policy from social protection concerns”. Women still had limited presence and power in political structures at both national and international levels. It was important to ensure “more careful monitoring of progress in ensuring women’s equal participation in these positions of economic power”.⁵

Beijing+5 outlined plans for future actions, which included:

- gender mainstreaming in all areas and at all levels and the complementarity between mainstreaming and special activities targeting women;

5 SELECTED FACTS ON GENDER EQUALITY

- Of the world’s one billion poorest people, three fifths are women and girls.
- Of the 960 million adults in the world who cannot read, two thirds are women.
- Seventy per cent of the 130 million children who are out of school are girls.
- With notable exceptions, such as Rwanda and the Nordic countries, women are conspicuously absent from parliaments, making up, on average, only 16 per cent of parliamentarians worldwide.
- Everywhere, women typically earn less than men, both because they are concentrated in low-paying jobs and because they are paid less for the same work.
- Although women spend about 70 per cent of their unpaid time caring for family members, that contribution to the global economy remains invisible.
- Up to half of all adult women have experienced violence at the hands of their intimate partners.
- Systematic sexual violence against women has characterized almost all recent armed conflicts and is used as a tool of terror and “ethnic cleansing”.
- In sub-Saharan Africa, 57 per cent of those living with HIV are women, and young women aged 15 to 24 years are at least three times more likely to be infected than men of the same age.
- Each year, half a million women die and 10 to 15 million suffer chronic disability from preventable complications of pregnancy and childbirth.

Source: UNDP. 2006. *Taking Gender Equality Seriously: Making Progress, Meeting New Challenges*. New York. UNDP: 2006. <http://www.undp.org.pl/publikacje/TakingGenderEqualitySeriously.pdf>, accessed June 2008.

- special focus on education, social services and health, including sexual and reproductive health;
- the HIV and AIDS pandemic;
- violence against women and girls;
- the persistent and increasing burden of poverty on women;
- vulnerability of migrant women including exploitation and trafficking;
- natural disaster and environmental management;
- development of strong, effective and accessible national machineries for the advancement of women;
- formulation of strategies to enable women and men to reconcile and share equally work and family responsibilities; and

- women's access to decision-making, particularly in peacekeeping processes.

Specific targets were established and others were confirmed, such as:

- closing the gender gap in primary and secondary education by 2005, and free, compulsory and universal primary education for both girls and boys by 2015;
- achieving a 50 per cent improvement in levels of adult literacy by 2015, especially for women;
- creating and maintaining a non-discriminatory, as well as gender-sensitive, legal environment through reviewing legislation with a view to striving to remove discriminatory provisions as soon as possible, preferably by 2005;
- providing universal access to high quality primary health care throughout the life cycle, including sexual and reproductive health care, not later than 2015.⁶

In its 2005 review, Beijing+10 noted significant progress in promoting awareness of gender equality among governments and the public, including greater knowledge of how globalization, market liberalization, privatization, migration and the use of new technologies affect women. Improvements were noted in child and maternal mortality and education and literacy for women and girls. Issues such as the effects on girls and women of HIV and AIDS, trafficking and gender-based violence were also receiving greater attention. At the policy level, the importance of gender mainstreaming and of effective linkages and complementarities across policies, legislation and programming were also taking root. However, there was still a need for more multidimensional strategies that would bridge the gap between policies and practice. Furthermore, despite the policy and institutional changes, gender stereotypes were still pervasive and resulted in discriminatory practices.⁷

The Beijing Platform For Action and the subsequent amendments in Beijing+5 and Beijing+10 provide the

framework for the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), 2000, which recognize that “the promotion of gender equality and the empowerment of women are critical to the eradication of poverty, hunger and disease and the achievement of development that is truly sustainable”.⁸ Goal 3 is dedicated to the promotion of gender equality and the empowerment of women. It has been noted that all the other goals require a gender perspective, and there is a call to incorporate gender throughout the implementation of the MDGs. The Beijing Platform for Action also provides a framework for implementing the Programme of Action of the International Conference on

Population and Development (ICPD), with programmes for gender equality in areas of reproductive health care, education and literacy, unmet need for contraception, maternal mortality and morbidity reduction and HIV and AIDS.

Gender Equality, Women's Empowerment and Culture

“Cultural issues are behind the observed differentials between men and women in terms of

participation in the different spheres of development,” says a report by UNFPA, United Nations Population Fund, on cultural programming in Asia.⁹ Reports from Beijing+5 and Beijing+10 emphasized that stubborn cultural stereotypes of women persist despite institutional and policy changes.

Deep-rooted cultural beliefs sustain gender inequality. In Latin America, for example, feminist movements against domestic violence have found that cultural traditions that support patriarchal violence are among the major impediments to change. French, Spanish and Portuguese colonies followed the Code Napoleon, under which the father or husband had total power over the family and could treat them as he saw fit.¹⁰ The tradition continued essentially unchallenged after independence and until recent times, as the struggle to enforce the Maria da Penha law in Brazil illustrates (see page 32).

*What culture worth the name
would deny women the right to safe
motherhood? What value system would
send young people ignorant into the
world, when a little knowledge might
save their lives?*

—Dr. Nafis Sadik, UNFPA Executive Director,
1987-2000

6 POWER CAN BE:

- **Overt and Coercive**

The more powerful can use their positions to compel others to act in ways they would prefer not to.

- **Hidden and Coercive**

The more powerful can operate effectively from behind the scenes. For example, legal institutions may enforce social norms that discriminate against women and compel them to conform.

- **Overt and Non-Coercive**

People may use power in non-conflictual and non-coercive ways, building agreements in order to achieve desired outcomes.

- **Hidden and Non-Coercive**

Where there is tacit consensus, power relations are upheld unintentionally and even unconsciously. For example, there are groups which not only come to accept disadvantageous hierarchical arrangements but actively defend and uphold them.

Source: Moncrieffe, J. 2005. "Beyond Categories: Power, Recognition and the Conditions for Equity." Background paper for the *World Development Report 2006: Equity And Development*. New York: The World Bank.

Gender-based violence "is perpetuated through social and cultural norms and traditions, reinforcing male-dominated power structures".¹¹ From early infancy, women are taught "that they are inferior to men and often to blame for the violence inflicted upon them. As wives or partners, they must hold the family together, at any cost. Women and men both learn to turn a blind eye to, or accept, gender-based violence". Under these circumstances, domestic violence becomes "naturalized" and invisible.

Reports from Uganda demonstrate the ways in which cultures sustain unequal gender relations. Many men were adamant that their women are not supposed to have money: "After selling the maize, the husband may buy a dress or *lesu* for the wife. If women are allowed to own property, they will be on top of men." Women themselves provided a number of examples of the problems that occur when they were "allowed" to own property, particularly the difficulty of "sustaining a husband and economic independence; one has to be foregone".¹²

While beliefs may be changing among younger women, some older women retain and try to enforce them. In one area, the Uganda study found, women are forbidden from entering the lake. One younger woman asserted that there was nothing wrong with swimming in the lake. However, the older women objected. Women, they said, "should not go to the lake at all because they are always dirty". The "god" who was responsible for the site dictated this. Since the young women had failed to observe this instruction, the "god" would no longer bless the site.

Reports also show that domestic violence is widespread. "Husbands turn to battling their wives even on minor issues like failure to work hard in the garden or when his clothes are not washed (even if soap was not there)." It was reported that frustrated men were "beating their wives almost to death". Again, some women accepted and even justified this treatment: *It is us women who make the men beat us. Once the man goes to the lake, a woman gets another partner because she wants money. Women, especially the younger ones, have refused to stick to one partner. When there is a dance, all the men she has slept with gang up and beat her.*¹³

The Many Faces of Power: Examples from Africa

Power operates within cultures in many ways: through visible forms of coercion; hidden in legal norms, policies and governance structures;¹⁴ and ingrained in the perceptions people have of themselves. People can internalize and project both positive and negative perceptions of who they are. Where women internalize negative perceptions, they may uphold harmful power relations unintentionally and even unconsciously. Women may not only come to accept disadvantageous hierarchical arrangements but actively defend and uphold them. It is within cultures that these perceptions, beliefs and systems of meaning are cultivated, internalized and sustained. It is also within cultures that power relations are transformed through contestation and consensus building in order to achieve desired outcomes.

The cultural challenges described above are common to Western and non-Western, developed and developing countries. For example, in Messobo, Ethiopia, the traditional practice of child marriage has resulted in multiple reproductive health complications, including obstetric fistula and maternal death. "The practice will only change when

Probably the most insidious of the three dimensions of power, invisible power shapes the psychological and ideological boundaries of participation. Significant problems and issues are not only kept from the decision-making table but also from the minds and consciousness of the different players involved, even those directly affected by the problem. By influencing how individuals think about their place in the world, this level of power shapes people's beliefs, sense of self and acceptance of the status quo – even their own superiority and inferiority.¹⁶

Ethiopian society begins to value women as equal players in the country's social and economic development.”¹⁵

Popular culture and media in many societies treat women as sexual objects and present violence against women as normal. In some countries, representations of the “exotic woman” have more serious consequences for particular races. Gender inequalities – particularly for some categories of women and men – still exist, in both Western and non-Western societies.

Cultural Struggles Against Domestic Violence in Latin America

Advances in gender equality have never come without cultural struggles against the visible and invisible dimen-

sions of power and the practices that sustain gender inequalities and oppress women.

Struggles to eradicate domestic violence have been going on throughout Latin America. Women's rights advocates have worked steadily and consistently for government legislation and effective public policies. They are also committed to eradicating the patriarchal values within cultural contexts that support gender-based violence, in order to place private violence in the public eye and “denaturalize” it. In 1994, the Organization of American States (OAS) adopted the Interamerican Convention to Prevent, Sanction and Eradicate Violence Against Women. Chile and Argentina adopted similar conventions in 1994; Bolivia, Ecuador and Panama in

7 MAYMANA AND MOZIFUL'S STORY

Maymana and her son Moziful live in a village just outside central Bangladesh. By Maymana's account, up to the early 1990s, she, her husband Hafeez and their three children were only occasionally poor, with a modest income and a few assets, including three rickshaws and an acre of paddy land. However, Hafeez fell ill. He visited the local pharmacist, who provided medicines but was not equipped to diagnose the problem. At the government health centre, staff requested bribes but did not treat him. A local doctor informed him that he needed special medicines. The rickshaws had to be sold to meet the medical expenses. The family reduced consumption and stopped purchasing small amenities.

Hafeez got progressively worse and eventually died, leaving Maymana and

her son Moziful, then 12 years old, alone (by now both daughters were married). Following local custom, Maymana's father-in-law took control of the plot of land, which meant that Maymana had to resort to borrowing and begging for food. Moziful managed to find casual employment, but he had a disability which brought stigma within the community.

Despite warnings and threats, Maymana decided to seek legal redress and brought her case against her father-in-law to the local village court. Though she had rights to the land according to Bangladeshi law, her claim was predictably unsuccessful: The court followed traditional custom, which was biased against women, and allowed her father-in-law to retain ownership. As a result, Maymana and Moziful (both of whom

are illiterate and ill) rely on social networks for survival.

The community regards Maymana as “deserving poor” (a distressed woman) who, though in need of charity, is not entitled to full membership in the women's group. Charity, loans and Moziful's meagre earnings have allowed them to avoid destitution, though they subsist in chronic poverty. Socially ascribed identities—as reflected in attitudes to disability, old age, women, illness and misfortune—have entitled Maymana and Moziful to some assistance, but at the same time have blocked possible escape routes.

Source: From Hulme, D. 2003. “Thinking ‘Small’ and the Understanding of Poverty: Maymana And Moziful's Story”. Working Paper No 22. Manchester: Institute for Development Policy and Management.

1995; Colombia, Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Nicaragua and Peru in 1996; and the Dominican Republic modified its penal code to include legislation against domestic violence in 1997.¹⁸

In Brazil, the process of change started with the creation of special police stations for battered women (*delegacias especiais de atendimento às mulheres*, or DEAMs), ideally staffed by policewomen. The first such police station was created in São Paulo in 1985 and there are now over 300 in the country. Many states have built reference centres and shelters for battered women, and provided a network of services to assist female victims of violence. However, the major instrument to combat domestic violence was developed fairly recently. Law no. 11.340, sanctioned on 7 August 2006, and named *Lei Maria da Penha* (in honour of a woman shot and crippled for life by her ex-companion 20 years ago),

not only increases the period of imprisonment for such violent acts from one to three years but it also allows preventive arrests and arrests for flagrant conduct. In addition, it includes a number of measures to protect the woman.

However, legislation to criminalize domestic violence is not always sufficient. In Brazil, several judges have claimed that the Maria da Penha law is “unconstitutional” because it “discriminates” against men. Some have called for women’s submission, as in former times. Feminists recognize that engaging with culture is essential for eradicating domestic violence and that “cultural factors can ... be harnessed to bring about change for the better”.^{19,20}

The achievement of ... gender equality in the West required and still requires a transformation of the cultures of many institutions – workplaces, trade unions, the church, professions, families, political parties, schools, etc. – all at a different rate and in different ways. Gender equality ... could just as well have been described as alien to Western cultures as to non-Western ones. It was (and continues in important aspects to be), for example, rejected by the major Christian churches. It is the product of intense political struggle and cultural work, not immanence It is only in the last few decades that a wide gap has opened between the “West” and “non-West” on the issue of gender equality.¹⁷



▲ Guatemalan girl. Customs and traditions can be reassuring in times of change.

© James Nelson/Getty Images

Culture, Gender and Human Rights

In cooperation with governments²¹ and civil society organizations, UNFPA applies the principles outlined in United Nations instruments on gender equality and women's empowerment, which see gender equality as a human right and women's empowerment as critical for promoting human development. Its programming approach is firmly based in the ICPD Programme of Action, which requires "the establishment of common ground, with full respect for the various religious and ethical values and cultural backgrounds".²² Culturally sensitive programming is key to building this common ground. It provides a practical and strategic response to the observation that cultural beliefs and perceptions are at the root of gender inequalities in many societies, and that gender equality and women's empowerment cannot be achieved unless they are also rooted in cultures.

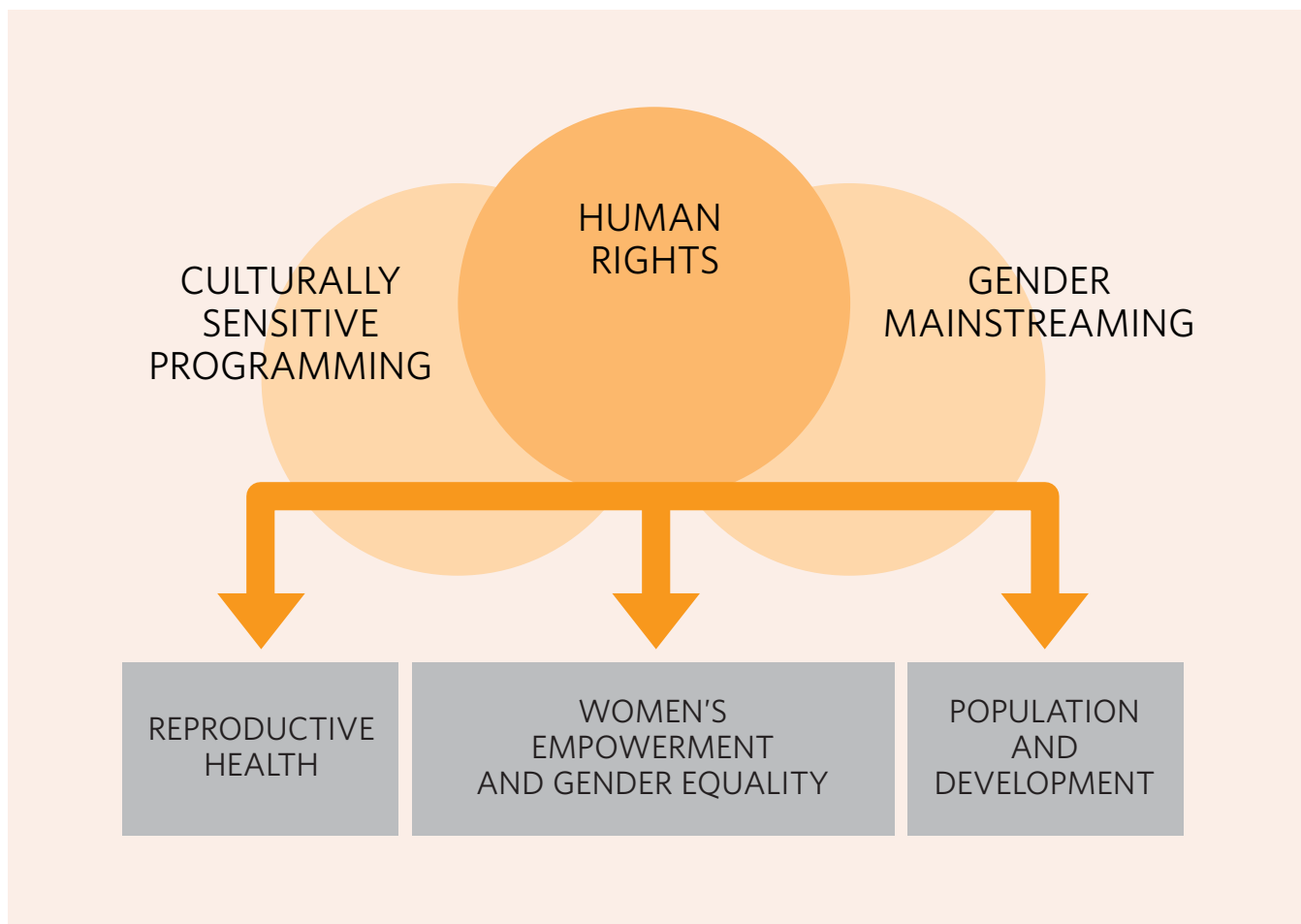
8 PROMOTING GENDER EQUALITY AND EMPOWERING WOMEN: THE VALUE OF THE CULTURE LENS

UNFPA's cooperative approach to programming integrates three elements: human rights, gender mainstreaming and cultural sensitivity. It is based on the following premises:

- All human beings are entitled to equal rights and protections.
- Gender mainstreaming is a strategic response to the widespread denial of women's human rights.
- Culturally sensitive approaches involve communities in supporting human rights in many cultural contexts.

Source: UNFPA. "Understanding Culture, Gender and Human Rights." http://unfpa.org/rights/main_presentation_3.swf, accessed June 2008. New York: UNFPA.

Figure 1: Understanding culture, gender and human rights



The *24 Tips to Culturally Sensitive Programming* (see box 2 in Chapter 1) identify useful guidelines for engaging with cultures in ways that can facilitate transformative change from within. Transformative change often entails cultural politics.

*Cultural politics is "... the process enacted when sets of actors shaped by, and embodying, different cultural meanings and practices come into conflict with each other.... When movements deploy alternative conceptions of women, nature, race, economy, democracy, or citizenship that unsettle dominant cultural meaning, they enact a cultural politics."*²³

Cultural politics rests on the assumption that systems of meanings are not bound and can be discussed, debated, challenged and even changed. However, the ways in which debates and discussions are introduced is important. Effecting change requires:

- willingness to learn about and understand people's cultural frameworks;
- reflecting on the organization's own frameworks;
- developing effective methodologies for understanding and responding to the specific needs, experiences, perceptions and behaviour among women and men, boys and girls;
- working with the men and women who have developed their own strategies for promoting human rights, gender equality and women's empowerment;
- challenging systems of meanings through a variety of strategies, from local to international levels; and
- mapping the community, national and international legal, political and economic contexts.

Negotiating Cultures: Seven Lessons from Experience

1. Culturally sensitive approaches are critical for loosening the power relations that underpin gender inequalities.

Power is multidimensional. In supporting national efforts towards women's empowerment and gender equality, culturally sensitive approaches go beyond visible power dynamics and seek to understand and respond to how power takes shape in three interacting levels of women's lives: the public, private and intimate realms.

9 CAN DEVELOPMENT INITIATIVES BE GENDER NEUTRAL?

Decisions made in planning an initiative shape the type of impact that it will have on culture. For example:

- A community-based rural water supply initiative could include efforts to involve women as well as men in problem identification and management ... **or not**, in which case the strategy reinforces the idea that decision-making is a male function and results in decisions that reflect only the priorities and perceptions of men.
- A governance approach concerned with the reform of the civil service could include research and public consultations on the equality implications of provisions on marriage, divorce, property in marriage, inheritance, etc ... **or not**, in which case it ignores aspects of the civil law that in many countries institutionalize discrimination against women.
- An infrastructure initiative that restructures a national telephone company's exchanges, equipment and workforce could include consideration of the gender aspects of the employment restructuring and retraining required for the new system ... **or not**, in which case it misses the opportunity to contribute to increased equality in the future workforce of an important employer.

Decisions taken in planning are not neutral with respect to gender equality, even where gender issues are not considered.

Source: Schalkwyk, J. 2001. "Questions About Culture, Gender, Equality and Development Cooperation," pp 5-6. Prepared for and produced by the Canadian International Development Agency, Quebec (CIDA), Quebec.

*Mainstreaming a gender perspective is the process of assessing the implications for women and men of any planned action, including legislation, policies or programmes, in all areas and at all levels. It is a strategy for making women's as well as men's concerns and experiences an integral dimension of the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of policies and programmes in all political, economic and societal spheres so that women and men benefit equally and inequality is not perpetuated.*²⁴

- The **public realm** of power refers to the visible face of power as it affects women and men in their jobs, employment, public life, legal rights, etc.
- The **private realm** of power refers to relationships and roles in families, among friends, sexual partnerships and marriage.
- The **intimate realm** of power has to do with one's sense of self, personal confidence, psychology and relationship to body and health.

Washing one's hands of the conflict between the powerful and the powerless means to side with the powerful, not to be neutral.

—Paulo Freire, Brazilian educator

For an individual woman, the experience of power and powerlessness will be different based on race, class or age, and may even be contradictory in different realms of her life. For example, a woman politician who appears confident in public may accept a subordinate role in her family; she may even survive abuse in her private relationships while keeping up with the demands of her public duties.²⁵

10 SOCIAL STATUS AND GENDER DISCRIMINATION

Five men raped Devi, a Dalit (from the “untouchable” caste) woman and village development worker in India. The police initially refused to record her complaint, but public protest forced an inquiry and the matter came to trial. The lower court held that the delay in filing the complaint and in obtaining medical evidence showed that she was lying. The court considered it unlikely that a higher-caste man would rape a Dalit woman.

All Dalits, male and female, experience discrimination. Women are already reluctant to report violence against them, and the handling of Devi's case will probably add to their reluctance. It may even encourage further violations, as perpetrators realize that they are not likely to face a challenge. Dalit women will thus be even more marginalized — vulnerable to abuse because of their gender and deemed less worthy of protection on grounds of caste.

Source: Banda, F. and C. Chinkin. 2004. “Gender, Minorities and Indigenous Peoples,” p. 15. London: Minority Rights Groups International.

2. Culturally sensitive approaches must respond to variations in needs, experiences and cultures, depending on context and within contexts.

Particular groups can suffer more severe forms of discrimination; their experiences of inequality are compounded as “different discriminations intersect and overlap”. In a number of conflicts, sexual violence against minority women has become part of the ritual of ethnic cleansing,²⁶ as in the former Yugoslavia during the 1990s. Throughout the Rwandan genocide in 1994, Tutsi women were targeted, subjected to sexual abuse and then killed. In Gujarat, India, Muslim women have been sexually abused and held up as symbols of the subjugation and humiliation of the community.²⁷ Women from minority groups, indigenous women, women from different castes, races, cultures and religions can suffer multiple forms of discrimination, which help to cultivate different approaches to gender inequality. Culturally sensitive approaches must be sensitive to these “intersectionalities”.

Intersectionality has been explained through the metaphor of a traffic intersection. “Race, gender, class and other forms of discrimination or subordination are the roads that structure the social, economic or political terrain. It is through these thoroughfares that the dynamics of disempowerment travel.” These roads are seen as separate and unconnected but in fact they meet, cross over and overlap, forming complex intersections. Women who are marginalized by their sex, race, ethnicity or other factors [here, it is important to include cultures and religion/faith, which are often overlooked] are located at these intersections. The intersections are dangerous places for women who must negotiate the constant traffic through them to avoid injury and to obtain resources for the normal activities of life. Where systems of race, gender and class domination converge ... intervention strategies based solely on the experiences of women who do not share the same class or race backgrounds will be of limited help to women who because of race and class face different obstacles.²⁸

There is a significant challenge in applying conceptual knowledge within different contexts. People – including some in development – commonly resort to interpreting contexts based on their own experiences, inherited cultural frameworks, objectives and expectations.²⁹

3. Without knowledge of and consideration for how people negotiate their own contexts, well-intentioned policy change can incur more costs than benefits.

Culturally sensitive approaches recognize that social constructions of “gender”, “freedom” and “equality” will have different meanings in different cultures. These meanings underpin how people relate, what they consider significant and how they attach significance. In some cultures, women’s participation in particular aspects of community life and men’s participation in others are not regarded as inequality but as differences in responsibilities and roles. There is a tendency to globalize whatever meanings are prevalent, particularly by Western cultures; however, this approach fails to understand the subtleties of different contexts.

One-size-fits-all interventions can provoke unproductive conflicts, such as when they depict all men as aggressors and tyrants and women as passive, ignorant and powerless to change harmful power relations. Such

Ignorance of [the] contextualized notion of common sense ... has been endemic among policymakers in government and in development institutions By ignoring this [common sense], policymakers impose a structured and formulaic set of interventions on societies that ill-serve the purpose of improving well-being. Common sense, understood as part of a cultural system ... is a way of providing a knowledge base that shapes how people understand themselves and provides stability to human interactions.³⁰

11 UNDERSTANDING CULTURAL NORMS IN PROMOTING GENDER EQUALITY AND DEVELOPMENT

I am often asked, usually by expatriate development workers, whether by intervening on women’s behalf we are upsetting the gender roles and relations characteristic of the culture. In other words, are we fearful of imposing our own culture on the culture in which we are working, by initiating projects which impact on gender relations? Are we not leaving women more vulnerable than before, by asking them to step out of their culturally ascribed roles and relations?

The assumptions behind these questions need a close examination. Firstly, it is assumed that the culture of communities we work in as development practitioners are a seamless whole, without any cracks; secondly, that unequal gender relations characterize these cultures, and that there are no challenges to inequality from within the cultures. In fact, it is assumed that to be a woman in such cultures is to be passive, subservient and servile. The passive and subservient woman, who is also a victim, thus becomes the stereotype of these cultures.

The fear that we may be imposing our own cultural values by insisting on promoting gender equity in our development work is a real one. However, it is real not because we have concerns about cultural imperialism, but because we allow our own culture-based assumptions about women to colour the way we receive alternative visions of gender equality. We assume that women in developing countries are passive and docile, and that our own view of gender roles, norms and practices is true for everyone. We also fail to recognize the everyday forms of resistance put up by subordinated groups, because these forms of resistance may not correspond to our experience.

Source: Mukhopadhyay, M. 1995. "Gender Relations, Development Practice and 'Culture'." *Gender and Development* 3 (1):13-18. Oxford: Routledge, part of the Taylor & Francis Group.

crude oversimplification can disrupt families and communities and produce a backlash against the interventions, playing into the hands of those who oppose women’s empowerment and gender equality. Negotiating cultures requires recognizing and working from the cultural interpretations within different contexts.

4. Culturally sensitive approaches must recognize and learn from local resistance.

Those who hold power and seek to impose meanings in their own interest may oppose gender equality. They

describe policies and programmes that aim to promote gender equality as “cultural tampering” or attempts to impose “Western” values as opposed to recognizing people’s right to their cultures. The assumptions beneath these arguments are, first, that cultures are fixed and, second, that there is no internal resistance to inequalities. Such assumptions misrepresent women’s histories, their opinions and their actions. They also obscure men’s roles in challenging patriarchy.

For example, Argentina’s Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo recently completed 30 years of activism. The group was formed in 1977 by mothers and female relatives of the *desaparecidos* – those who were arrested without warrants and “disappeared” during the years of the military dictatorship (1976 to 1983). The women organized to demand justice for their children, marching around Plaza de Mayo in Buenos Aires, the seat of

government, wearing white scarves symbolizing their children’s diapers and their condition as mothers. “The denunciation of torture and murder by plain, hitherto ‘apolitical’ women had deep impact because the common cultural perception was that selfless mothers would not participate in political movements.”³¹

Before their children disappeared, these women were traditional housewives and mothers, tending to the well-being of their families from the safety of their homes. In going out in public to stage their protest and seek justice, the mothers crossed another, invisible threshold, politicizing the private realm and revolutionizing motherhood by extending mothers’ duties and concerns into the national and even international arenas.³² To them, “[t]o be a mother also meant fighting for the rights of their children, left voiceless by the government, and carrying on their children’s work and memory in their absence.”³³ This involved

12 OUR BEST DEFENDERS ARE OURSELVES

Excerpts from an interview with Marie Josee Lokongo Bosiko, Vice President of the National Union of Congolese Workers, shows how people strategically draw from both their cultural norms and formal rights in dealing with real life situations:

What are the main difficulties faced by Congolese women [who want] to become trade unionists? The first obstacle is gaining acceptance from men, who believe that a woman’s place is in the home, not a trade union. I got involved in the trade union movement when I was very young. We were afraid of men back then. But we have to work together to ensure that women can take their rightful place in unions. People have to understand that a union with many women members is a strong union, because having women taking part in union activities and recruiting other women is a huge asset. Unequal access to trade union education and training is another problem facing women workers. Most training opportunities are given to men, without the 30 per cent quota for women’s partici-

pation being respected. Also, married women must have advance permission from their husband to take part in courses outside the country. The Congolese Family Code requires this in its Article 448. The Family Code actually stipulates that a woman must receive her husband’s permission to do anything of any consequence. We have to teach women how to circumvent these problems. It’s important to be well organized, because if you go home after a union meeting and your husband sees that the children have been left unattended, he’s not going to want you to go to the next meeting. So we ask women to reconcile their roles as a wife, a mother and a worker. As a trade unionist who worked my way up from the grassroots to the level of vice president, I’m in a position to say that reconciling these roles is possible. We are, of course, fighting for amendment of all the legal dispositions, which are contrary to the rights of women.

Do your husband and family support your trade union work? Yes. As long as it

is accepted that a woman is faithful and does her job well, there is no reason to stop her from being an activist, because her husband, her family and her community all share in the fruit of her work as a unionist...

What about sexual harassment? It’s a major problem. We urge women to report any cases of this nature. It was, in fact, the theme of our International Women’s Day campaign this year: “No to sexual violence against women”. If a man is reported as soon as he starts to harass a woman, he will think twice about it; he’ll understand that it isn’t right. The perpetrators of harassment should be punished, and once they are, the problem will perhaps diminish. But women can also be harassers. We advise women how to respond when confronted with sexual harassment.

Source: Interview conducted by Samuel Grumiau, 28 August 2007. For the Resisting Women Network, Brussels. www.resistingwomen.net/spip.php?article157, accessed September 2008.

putting themselves at risk and disputing the meaning of their activities with the authorities.

Women testified that participation in the movement was empowering for them. María del Rosario de Cerruti explained: *“One of the things that I simply will not do now is shut up. The women of my generation in Latin America have been taught that the man is always in charge and the woman is silent even in the face of injustice.... Now I know that we have to speak out about the injustices publicly. If not, we are accomplices. I am going to denounce them publicly without fear. This is what I learned.”*

5. Culturally sensitive approaches are necessary for locating actual and potential alliances.

“The equal rights and inherent dignity of all members of the human family are affirmed by the world’s religious traditions and enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the Beijing Platform for Action, and the Millennium Development Goals, in which governments and donors renewed their pledge to uphold women’s rights and also endorsed women’s empowerment as integral to eradicating poverty and to achieving sustainable development.”³⁴ Yet, some aspects of religious discourse and some traditional practices can harm women and men and perpetuate gender inequality and human rights violations. Hence, the importance of seeking alliances with those who can influence behaviour and work together to change these realities. Alliances that span the domains of faith, human rights and gender equality are at the cutting edge of global, regional and local transformations. To realize these critical and cross-dimensional alliances requires an appreciation of the different perspectives, mandates, methods of communication and even pace of each set of actors – e.g., a culturally sensitive approach. For example, the Women, Faith and Development Alliance draws together specific faith-based and inter-faith religious groups, youth, women’s rights organizations, corporations and international development organizations in a concerted effort to promote gender equality. What brings these different constituencies together is a shared vision of what constitutes human dignity, but what will enable them to work together will be a pragmatism about the context each comes from and is accountable to. In supporting the Alliance, UNFPA is adapting its culturally

*We will be talking about culture and development but we must realize that there is also, among us ... a culture of how we do our development work. Who makes the decisions often determines the kinds of decisions that get made. But also HOW the decision-making is structured in any organization also determines the constraints. For instance, if men are always the decision-makers, does that guarantee that women’s voices will be heard?*³⁶

sensitive approach to facilitate constructive dialogue and collaboration among people with a variety of aims and organizational backgrounds.

6. Cultures are contested; differences in values and norms may or may not support gender equality.

Some of these internal contestations come from men, through projects such as Men for Gender Equality Now. This project is part of the African Women’s Development and Communication Network (FEMNET). It was initiated by a consultation among men on gender-based violence in Kenya. Since 2001, the men’s network has expanded and now works with men across different countries. The project has the following key objectives:

- Promote understanding of gender concepts and practice and promote gender equality.
- Create awareness about and share information and experiences on HIV and AIDS and its relationship to human rights.
- Support survivors of gender-based violence (GBV) by providing emergency referral and follow-up services.
- Network and collaborate with other actors around GBV and HIV and AIDS.
- Conduct research on GBV's prevalence.
- Build the capacity of its members to understand, promote and apply gender equality principles and approaches in their relations and communities.
- Generate the resources required to support activities such as working for government and donor support.³⁵

13 MEN AND WOMEN UNITE IN THE FIGHT FOR GENDER EQUITY AND EQUALITY

“It would be a good thing if public opinion [were] quite clear about the fact that not all men are aggressors and that many men are opposed to aggression and violence. I think that the most important struggles in the world, for human rights, against violence and torture ... cannot be left to a single social group Women’s struggles cannot be left solely to women. Men need to show solidarity, because they are living proof that there are men who repudiate this form of aggression and will do everything in their power to ensure that the number of people who practice violent acts – which unfortunately is very high across all classes and all parts of the world – continues to be reduced by democratic opposition on the part of both men and women.”

Source: Boaventura de Souza Santos. 2002. Quoted by Medrado, B. and J. Lyra. in “Men, Masculinities and Gender Violence” at the Expert Group Meeting on The Role of Men and Boys in Achieving Gender Equality, Papai Institute, Brasilia, 21-24 October, 2003.

There is now wide agreement that gender equality must involve men.

Culturally sensitive approaches acknowledge that men are a heterogeneous group for whom gender equality has different meanings. At the same time, these approaches advocate and delineate how to involve men in discussions and actions on gender equality to transform gender relations, and around more specific objectives, such as reducing maternal mortality rates and ending gender-based violence.

These specific objectives, which are also central to the MDGs, depend fundamentally on tackling the relationships of power within families, communities and the state that lead to abuse of women’s and girls’ rights. Tackling adverse relationships necessarily requires working with the men, women, youth, boys and girls who are involved or become involved in these relationships, and working together with those who influence their attitudes and behaviour. Furthermore, some of the most durable changes come when men work with other men and boys to promote gender equality and empower women.

Since 1995, national and international development institutions have shifted from a “women in development” to a “gender and development” (GAD) paradigm. This shift reflects the recognition that gender equality and women’s

empowerment can only be achieved if men are actively involved in challenging patriarchal structures and, more personally, if their own relationships of power with women are the objects of change.³⁷ The GAD framework has revealed that men also have different approaches to and experiences of gender equality, and that there are groups of men who are interested in transforming gender relations, not only in women’s interests but in their own. The GAD framework has also helped to uncover power relations among men; while men do not suffer the domination that some women encounter, the masculine order can have adverse consequences for men who do not conform to the stereotypes.

In October 2007, academics, policymakers and practitioners who attended the conference “Politicizing Masculinities: Beyond the Personal” confirmed that despite the GAD framework, men and women are still being categorized in unhelpful ways: “The ‘men as problems, women as victims’ discourse still holds sway.... Both [views] rest on essentialisms that are rarely brought into question. Furthermore, the current work on men and masculinities needs to go beyond how men act in personal domains to broader questions on power relations and core equity issues, such as equal pay and entitlements, representation in politics, and changes to institutions that sustain the gender order. An individual man may be willing but the institutional setting or the peer group culture pushes in the other direction.”³⁸

14 ENCOURAGING MEN TO BE PART OF REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH AND GENDER EQUALITY

Changes in both men’s and women’s knowledge, attitudes and behaviour are necessary conditions for achieving the harmonious partnership of men and women. Men play a key role in bringing about gender equality since, in most societies, men exercise significant power in nearly every sphere of life, ranging from personal decisions regarding the size of families to the policy and programme decisions taken at all levels of government. It is essential to improve communication between men and women on issues of sexuality and reproductive health, and the understanding of their joint responsibilities, so that men and women are equal partners in public and private life.

Source: ICPD Programme of Action, para 4.24



▲ Traditions may persist in modern settings – but sometimes reminders are needed.
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Practitioners told of their work in challenging institutions:

Reaching out to raise critical consciousness of men in poor areas (South Africa)

Mbuyiselo Botha: “We have an innovative and creative way of reaching men ... we go to the shebeens [local bars]. These places are very important because they are where issues of masculinity are entrenched. We first get buy-in from the shebeen owner ... then we ask men if we can talk to them about what it means to be a man. You find various responses. In one incident, a young man said, ‘All women are witches.’ Then I asked him, ‘Do you mean even your mother?’

She’s one of those witches?’ He agreed, but this was captured on national television, and when he arrived home, his mother chucked him away!”

Promoting political consciousness of gender and masculinities (Nicaragua)

Patrick Walsh: “We have developed a community intervention strategy which works with men in the contexts of their communities. Men live in the communities, they live with women, they live in families – they are not just isolated men. As part of that, we run a training course for 20 to 25 men from the community, who, ten times during the year, have a one-day workshop to give them the space to reflect and analyze from their own perspectives and experiences. There is a thematic logic to the workshops, working initially on what it means to be men and women, and the characteristics of masculinity and femininity in Nicaraguan society; then the whole issue of what work we do, what work women do, the value that’s given to that; moving into power and violence; then moving into sexuality What we end up doing is promoting processes of personal development and growth for men, starting from a gender analysis ... enabling men to look at what are called feminine attributes and show that these are human characteristics, human values and human possibilities that we as men can also take on as part of our masculinity.”³⁹

7. Negotiating cultures for gender equality, women’s empowerment and human rights requires reflective, critical and comprehensive approaches.

In conformity with the global consensus at ICPD, UNFPA is committed to attacking, at their roots, some of the most pervasive forms of gender discrimination in public, private and intimate spaces: reproductive health inequities, gender-based violence, economic discrimination and harmful traditional practices. It is important to UNFPA’s programming strategy that it collaborates not only with governments but with local organizations and individuals who have been advocating change. For example, in Mauritania, local midwives broke the culture of silence that had long surrounded rape, and which often resulted in the victims of rape being imprisoned and the

perpetrators freed. UNFPA supported the collection of statistics on sexual violence and the establishment of a centre to meet the needs of survivors. UNFPA helped to move these issues from private to public spaces, building consensus among local imams, judges, police, government officials and members of the public that women must be protected from sexual violence. These interventions have led to a notable reduction in the incidence of rape and observed changes in attitudes to rape, as well as to the collection of quality data on rape.⁴⁰

In Ethiopia, UNFPA supports the *Berhane Hewan* project, which provides adolescent girls with education to help them delay marriage. Though Ethiopian law prohibits marriage before the age of 18, early marriage is a longstanding cultural practice that often results in reproductive health problems such as obstetric fistula or in maternal death. Educational opportunities are important because they offer girls a different perception of themselves and their potential. They also lead to changes in community perceptions, as families are

involved in the planning and implementation of the education project.

Cultural politics are controversial, and consensus can be difficult to achieve. In supporting women's empowerment in countries as diverse as Nicaragua, Chad, Viet Nam and the Lao People's Democratic Republic, UNFPA has been working with various cultural actors. From faith-based organizations (such as the Group of Islamic Associations for Questions of Population and Development in Niger) to traditional associations (e.g., the Association of African Traditional Leaders) to indigenous peoples networks (e.g., the *Enlace Continental de Mujeres Indígenas de las Américas*, Region Sur, coordinated by another indigenous organization – Chirapaq – in Peru), UNFPA uses the culture lens to ensure local acceptance and engagement on issues including gender equality and reproductive health. These types of interventions are producing durable changes.