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Negotiating Culture: Some Conclusions

The starting point of this report is the universal validity and application of the international human rights framework. Understanding how values, practices and beliefs affect human behaviour is fundamental to the design of effective programmes that help people and nations realize human rights. Nowhere is this understanding more important than in the area of power relations between men and women and their impact on reproductive health and rights. Development practice is firmly located at this nexus of culture, gender relations and human rights. It is from this point that creative and sustainable interventions emerge.

Culture is a source of knowledge, identity and power. Yet, cultures are dynamic, they adapt to changing circumstances, and they themselves contribute to change. The impetus for cultural change may come from external circumstances, but transformations come from within, through processes specific to the culture.

▶ ***International development agencies ignore culture – or marginalize it – at their peril. Advancing human rights requires an appreciation of the complexity, fluidity and centrality of culture by intentionally identifying and partnering with local agents of change.***

This partnership is especially valuable in a rapidly changing set of external circumstances, including climate change and economic globalization.

Culturally sensitive approaches, as the means through which culture is successfully negotiated, are about integrating economic, political, social and other dimensions to develop a comprehensive picture of how people function within their social contexts, and why they make the choices they do. In so doing, the report demonstrates the strength of a culturally sensitive approach to realizing gender equality and human rights.

▶ ***Approaches based on cultural knowledge provide viability to policymaking – and enable the “cultural politics” required for human rights.***

This report illustrates how deep-rooted cultural beliefs sustain gender inequalities, and how gender-based violence is perpetuated through social and

◀ *A group of older men in Tajikistan. In many cultures, small groups of elders have traditionally made decisions affecting the whole community.*

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cultural norms which some women may themselves reinforce and perpetuate. At the same time, advances on gender equality issues have never come without cultural struggles against visible and invisible dimensions of power – that is, a “cultural politics” which involves creating alternatives to dominant cultural meanings.

An approach which interprets a culture by analysing characteristics such as its history, power relationships and dynamics, politics and economics is able to go beyond *how* things are to understand *why* they are the way they are, how they might be changing and what is influencing change. This “cultural politics” is important for effective policymaking; it provides a context, enables strategic partnerships, identifies spaces for intervention and ensures that policies are in line with and support local initiatives.

As the framework of human rights has taken shape, the language and politics of human rights have opened space for cultural changes. People are using the language of rights to make their own claims, because this is the language of resistance to deprivation and oppression which is common to all cultures. Negotiating culture with a focus on human rights effectively questions, delegitimizes and, in the long run, erodes oppression.

Finding out what people believe and think and what makes sense to them, and working with that knowledge, does not require equal acceptance of all values and practices. Cultural fluency offers important insights into harmful cultural beliefs and practices, as well as the positive and empowering aspects which can underpin rights-based practices. This is a necessary and ongoing requirement for consolidating cultural legitimacy to advance human rights.

► ***Cultural fluency determines how systems of meanings, economic and political opposition or supportive policies develop – and can be developed.***

Population issues at the community, family and individual levels come down to decisions about the number of children to have and when to have them, decisions about health care and health-related behaviour, investments in children (often depending on the

gender of the child and anticipated future returns to the family) and the quality of care to provide mother and child. All of these decisions are made within a specific cultural context.

These decisions influence poverty rates and policies in any given country. Maternal mortality rates, for instance, mirror the huge discrepancy between the haves and the have-nots, both within a society and between countries. At the same time, maternal health indicators are used to gauge health systems’ performance in terms of access, gender equality and institutional efficiency. These intersectionalities are important dimensions to identify and assess during policy formulation and implementation. Opposition to the provision of information and services – in the area of adolescent reproductive health for instance – even if played out in the political arena, is culturally rooted.

Remittances from migrants are much more than an economic phenomenon – they demonstrate how cultures decipher and translate family and communal responsibilities and obligations to provide security. Similarly, culture plays an important role in determining rejection or acceptance of migrants and policies which host countries adopt in response to migration. Culture is a feature of the dynamics of trafficking, which is damaging to communities of both origin and destination. Cultural fluency entails an awareness of the centrality of culture, of the domain of cultural interactions and of the nature, range and modality of partnerships required to tackle these issues.

► ***To develop cultural fluency, UNFPA proposes a “culture lens” as a programming tool.***

The culture lens helps to identify the various factors in contesting and changing the practices underpinning gender inequality. It helps UNFPA work with its partners who negotiate with individuals, groups and communities, and build alliances for the realization of human rights through effective programming design.

Culturally informed perspectives appreciate the different dimensions of power, and how power works within cultures. People may value and accept cultural norms without being persuaded to do so; but cultures are also manipulated to sustain power structures and relationships. Visible cultural domination is easier to



▲ *Police officers in Haiti. More action is needed to bring women into traditionally male-dominated professions like law enforcement.*

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recognize than the hidden and invisible dimensions of power. Hidden power prevents some issues from even reaching the agenda for discussion. Invisible or internalized power is perhaps the most intractable form. People may accept cultural norms that harm them, because they have negative views of themselves. The different forms of power have differing implications for policy, and culturally sensitive approaches must be attuned to them.

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 intersecting levels of women's and men's lives (public, private and intimate). These approaches enable an acknowledgement of how cultural pressures around gender can increase men's vulnerability to sexual ill-health by increasing risky behaviour. This, in turn, reduces the likelihood that men will seek help; instead, they may seek multiple partners in their anxiety to prove themselves

“real men”. Cultural pressures around masculinity, coupled with sexual repression, increase the incidence of rape and other forms of gender-based violence.

Culturally sensitive approaches recognize that social constructions of “gender”, “freedom” and “equality” will have different meanings in different cultures; one-size-fits-all interventions can provoke more harm than good. Examples abound from contexts of armed conflict, when men are depicted as aggressors and tyrants and women as passive, ignorant and powerless to change harmful power relations. Such assumptions of vulnerability can blind development assistance providers to the resilience and creativity of people affected by armed conflicts. Such oversimplifications can produce a backlash against development assistance, and play into the hands of those who oppose women's empowerment and gender equality.

► *Culturally sensitive approaches call for different analytical and operational frameworks and for introspection among members of the development community.*

Culturally sensitive approaches demand that human realities, fundamentally including cultures, are the basis for policy rather than abstract reasoning, grand theories and generalized assumptions about human preferences and objectives.

Culturally sensitive approaches reject rigid ethnocentrism. They recognize that maternal health and ageing, for example, may have very different meanings in different cultural contexts. They seek to understand those differences and meanings – why and how people (both women and men) think and act the way they do – without assuming that people ought to think and act the way “we” do.

Tackling the ethnocentricities of development institutions can be especially challenging, because reflective practice involves each person confronting his or her own cultural framework. It also requires candid analysis of how organizations and individuals exercise power, and with what effects.

Culturally sensitive approaches avoid wholesale generalizations about people and their cultures. They do not allow for ready-made assumptions about people's intentions, priorities and capacities, but take the time to learn

about, accommodate and build on people's own efforts. They acknowledge that people within the same cultural contexts can have different values and objectives. They seek the deep local knowledge – the fluency – and relationships that can provide the basis for dialogue and mutual change.

Cultural awareness and engagement will serve very narrow instrumental purposes if the sole objective is to use cultural mechanisms in order to change “others”. Culturally sensitive approaches provide a platform for critical reflection on cultures and how they influence development processes. They encourage organizations and individuals concerned with development to confront and change the conventional ways in which they think and work.

This report shows that development practitioners ignore culture at their peril. This is not because culture is everything, but because poverty, poor health, lack of education and conflict also contribute to destroying and undermining culture. There is, therefore, a strong link between cultural fluency, cultural politics and tackling the root causes of distress and denial of human rights.

Cultural fluency is an integral part of a multidimensional approach to development, rather than a distinct and superior method of analysis. Culturally sensitive approaches encourage humility among those who work with communities for the well-being of all their members, without discrimination. They are concerned with building the relationships of recognition, respect and trust which are fundamental for human development.