

# Statement at the 2015 UN Population Award Ceremony

*Dr. Thoraya A. Obaid*  
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Your Excellency Ambassador Edita Hrdá, Permanent Representative of the Czech Republic, Chair of the United Nations Population Award

Mr. Jan Eliason, Deputy Secretary-General

Dr. Babatunde Ostinemhim, Secretary of the United Nations Population Award, Executive Director, UNFPA

Family, Friends, ladies and gentlemen

It is with great honour and humility that I receive this prestigious United Nations Population Award. I wish to thank the distinguished committee members who awarded me this honour.

As I pondered what I would say at this special occasion, I seem, at first, to be thinking of several distinct issues. Should I talk about population and development and the empowerment of women globally, or what it all meant to me personally? I decided to do both.

Within that context, I would like to place the realities of my particular journey within the context of today's esteemed prize and the rights of women.

The Programme of Action for Population and Development, 1994, noted the following:

“Men play a key role in bringing about gender equality, since, in most societies men exercise preponderant power in nearly every sphere of life, from personal decisions regarding the size of the families to the policy and programmes decisions taken at all levels of Government.”  
(para 4.24)

Chapter IV on Gender Equality, Equity and Empowerment of Women, section on Male responsibilities and participation.”

This award is really not for me alone. It is a recognition of the significant support, solidarity and partnership, extended from five men, at different moments in my life. Their decisions impacted the life of a girl from Saudi Arabia – who would have been otherwise unknown: my father for educating me as a religious duty and a human right; King Faisal Alsaud for giving me the first scholarship for a Saudi girl to study in the United States; King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz for nominating me for the post of UNFPA Executive Director; Mr. Kofi Annan for believing that I might bring something different to UNFPA; and my husband, Dr. Mahmoud Saleh for supporting my right to take on the challenge of UNFPA leadership while living in two different continents throughout my UNFPA tenure, and now again during my Shura Council term. Their support demonstrates that the engagement of men is necessary for the progress of women.

But this recognition of partnership would be seriously incomplete, without thanking *the women* whose support was equally instrumental. My gratitude to my mother, Aisha Al-Khatib, who supported my right for education from the time I was three years old by sending me to a kutab – maddrassah - and to boarding school in Cairo at the age of seven. And my gratitude to my two daughters, Rawya and Reem Charif whose support has been generous. This is my first opportunity to acknowledge them publically – Rawya, and Reem and now little grand-daughter Lina Aysha, you are the warmth in my life and without you my life would not have been complete.

I have been very lucky to have a supportive family- all my brothers and sisters were and continue to be supportive. I thank them through the family members who travelled to join me here: my sister Fadwa and her daughter Layal and my nephew Nawaf Essam Obaid.

And what can I say to thank Dr. Nafis Sadik who was my role model when I was a young professional at UNESCWA. I admired her courage, outspoken honesty about the rights of women and her continuous efforts to bring these rights to the forefront. I often sought her unfailing wisdom during my tenure as Executive Director and she always responded generously.

Excellencies, Family, friends, ladies and gentlemen,

When Secretary-General Kofi Annan interviewed me for the UNFPA Executive Director post, he asked me what I bring to the organization. My answer was simple: the organization is strong; it has outstanding and committed staff led by a passionate leader, Dr. Nafis Sadik, and an agenda that touches upon women's rights in a sensitive and private domain, yet central to all issues of population and development. UNFPA is dealing with a heavily culturally-loaded agenda that has deep societal and personal implications which require community action. The secret of its success would lie in linking human rights, including women's rights, to the positive values of communities, such that people themselves can bring about necessary changes, with pride and a sense of ownership.

This is an area of discussion that is often misunderstood or rejected because culture is largely assumed to be a hindrance to women. And that is true in some aspects. But the purpose is never to glorify or condone all that is cultural. Nor to empower the powerful, clergy or officials. It is about empowering the communities themselves to determine what moves them for a better life.

It is precisely because of the impact of values and beliefs on the lives of women that communities should understand and analyse, contest and replace what is negative, and expand the positive.

This very understanding is well-expressed in the introductory paragraph of chapter 2 of the Programme of Action on Population and Development, under Principles, which states:

“The implementation of the recommendations contained in the Programme of Action is the sovereign right of each country, consistent with national laws and development priorities, with full respect for the various religious and ethical values and cultural backgrounds of its people, and in conformity with universally recognized international human rights.”

Many often choose to forget or ignore this paragraph because it allows for religious and ethical values - but they are linked to a very clear proviso: “in conformity with universally recognized international human rights”.

And I believe this is the challenge that the development agenda in general and the empowerment of women and population specifically are facing in their post 2015 negotiations.

Your Excellencies, family, friends, ladies and gentlemen,

Allow me to recall my first statement at the UNFPA Executive Board in February 2001, in which I introduced myself in a most un-UN-like fashion. These words explain what I mean by linking values and beliefs to human rights principles. They also explain how I came to be the person who would eventually be awarded the King Abdulaziz Medal of the First Degree for international service; the first Muslim to receive a recognition from the Union Theological Seminary in New York, for the courage to link religious values with human rights; and now, this dearly held UN Population Award.

I quote: I come from a middle class Saudi Arabian family with firm roots in Medina, the second Muslim holy city. ... My father was educated in the Madrassa in the Holy Mosque of Medina, like all children at that time. He thus had a solid Islamic religious education .... [My parents] believed that they had an obligation, as believers, to educate all their children, both boys and girls; because knowledge is an essential principle of Islamic teachings. Indeed, the first ever verse of the Quran is an order ... to read in the name of God. Thus, ..., it became the obligation of all Muslims to ensure that their children read, that they become educated. It is therefore the most fundamental enshrinement of the rights of children to get an education.

... Knowledge [both in Islamic teachings and in international discourse] allows people to make decisions based on facts and information, in other words to make informed decisions about ... their lives. With informed decisions, comes both responsibility and accountability.

I continue to quote: In many ways, I am what the ICPD Programme of Action is all about – allowing women to make choices in their lives, taking into consideration that particular historical moment, social conditions and cultural context. ... I am, ... , an example of what governments and NGOs in each country are striving to achieve through the implementation of ICPD recommendations as well as the recommendations of the various global conferences. Unknowingly and in many ways, my parents ensured that I

exercised my Right to Development as an individual, and my Government ensured my Right to Development as a citizen.

What is important is that my story is not unique. There are numerous such women in the countries that we serve, and in the various cultural settings with which we deal. We just need to identify these experiences and demonstrate that supporting women to have choices in their lives does not threaten the social fabric of the society; rather, it is the way the society enacts its duties and ensures the full enjoyment of the rights of its people. It is the way societies are energized and are empowered to move forward. End of quote

Your Excellencies, family, friends, ladies and gentlemen,  
Since retiring as of 2011 and returning home, I have been engaged with this challenge every single minute of my life. You have seen my introductory video in which I was wearing the abaya (covering the body) and tarha (covering the head). Let me elaborate on its significance. This video was taped after one of the Shura sessions, taken courtesy of Majlis As-Shura (Consultative Council). I am one of the 30 women whom the late King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz appointed for the first time in 2013 for a four-year term with all duties and privileges. And I have just been elected as the chair of the Committee for Human Rights and Oversight Commissions, the first woman to head a committee in the Shura.

So my question is, should my empowerment be judged by what I have on my head or what I have in my head? Should I reject wearing the abaya and be isolated or should I wear it and be the real change I want to see?

I am sure you agree that that the membership of the 30 women (20 percent) in the Council and the participation of women in the forthcoming municipality election in August 2015 for the first time raise the glass ceiling for the empowerment of women in my country, in spite of many existing challenges. Being part of the process of the legislative process in all sectors of development and mainstreaming the rights of women are critical priorities nationally and globally.

For me, the discussions on the empowering aspects of Islam are, at this point, just as critical as the discussions about the empowering aspects of human rights. Linking empowering values and beliefs to international human rights is a daily

struggle and it is worth undertaking. It would allow ownership through what people know and what they hold dear. It would contribute to opening windows into the international world of universal values as they become rooted and owned locally. And this applies not only to Muslim countries and to empowering women, but also to empowering all citizens wherever they are on this globe.

Your Excellencies, family, friends, ladies and gentlemen,

It is a daily preoccupation trying to understand the present hostile and violent environment of extremism, so much in contradiction to the human rights principles we all work so hard to ground in our societies. Leaving aside the economically motivated wars and the intra-country conflicts especially in my region, I would like to focus on only one perspective at this point and simplify it as much as possible.

The 20<sup>th</sup> Century was a murky century of global wars and colonization, followed by a period of nationalism and independence of developing countries. To simplify the message, I can say it was a period of “I versus the Other”- I am right; they are wrong. I am rich; they are poor. I am developed; they are backward. It is all about the “I” and not the Other.

And then technology, especially communication technology, came to change all our lives: borders were opened, markets were accessible, labour moved, employment changed. And the world was called a “village” interconnected as never before. *But...* Did everyone have a sense of belonging to this global village? For some, the answer is certainly yes. For many others, change was too rapid and not all were able to cope with its impact. Thus the natural instinct of clinging to what one knows best- one’s values and beliefs.

With the aggressiveness of a market becoming global, comes, by necessity, globalized values. We all have to look the same, eat the same, dress the same and even talk and want the same. In other words, the ‘Other’ was expected to disappear if the individual were to be part of this global society. But the definition and the fear of the “Other” merely grew bigger by the day.

I believe the 21<sup>st</sup> century has given us an opposite narrative. Rather than “one global village”, we hear and see the claim for “my little village”, or indeed, “my

own province” “or my own segment of a state” or even “my own state”. It is a century wherein the assertion of identities of all kinds - religious, ethnic, political, racial, tribal - becomes a defining feature of our existence. The predominant narrative is therefore, “I versus the Other. And the Other is the threat”.

And this is not just among groups that claim to be Muslims where violence and cruelty have increasingly become a hallmark and where “terrorist entrepreneurship” has become a lucrative business. There are in addition other extremist expressions around the world, from the Christian Right in the US to the Ultra-Orthodox Jews in Israel. We even witness the rise again of racial violence and crime in the US, the expulsion of Muslims from Myanmar by traditionally peaceful Buddhists; an exclusionary discourse of some Hindu nationalists and the emergence of a xenophobic discourse of the political right across groups in Europe as they win local elections. The thread throughout is asserting the groups’ identity - ‘I versus the Other’.

In reality, the basic human rights principle of WE is being eroded as the search for the I emerges strongly. Negotiations in the UN on issues related to empowerment of women, population and development, sexual and reproductive health seem déjà vu of previous negotiation difficulties.

We are therefore, called upon to work even harder and with wisdom to connect international principles of human rights to people’s daily lives, values and beliefs. This is the precise nexus wherein a people feel proud of who they are and what they have - and can make a clear connection with the larger world community.

After all, the United Nations is ultimately about the international will, and the commitment of each and all nations, to achieve and protect the rights of all peoples. The United Nations is about We the People.

But the work of United Nations is also a key means to ensure people’s ownership *of their own* destinies.

And this is what the introductory paragraph in the chapter of Principles in the Programme of Action on Population and Development is about.

Excellencies, family, friends, ladies and gentlemen,

I would not be here receiving this prestigious award had my life not been about how beliefs and values resonating with the principles of human rights were united to make me who I am, personifying a human rights rooted social agenda of development, within my own family, in my own country, and as a global citizen.