

# Generation of Change: Young People and Culture





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## Editorial Team

*The State of the World Population 2008 Youth Supplement*

Martin Caparros (stories), Dr. Laura Laski and Saskia Schellekens with support from Malak Khatib-Maleh

Editing:

Alex Marshall

Research Assistance:

Malak Khatib-Maleh

Administrative Assistance:

Malak Khatib-Maleh

## Acknowledgements

Sincere gratitude goes to the numerous UNFPA colleagues in Country Offices and UNFPA Headquarters, as well as UNFPA partners for their inputs provided and information shared, with particular appreciation for Country Offices and UNFPA partners in Colombia, Ethiopia, Mongolia, Mozambique, Occupied Palestinian Territories, Viet Nam and for the Spanish Office of International Cooperation that assisted in the facilitation of the interviews of the young people portrayed in this publication.

Special appreciation goes to Dr. Thoraya Ahmed Obaid, Executive Director of UNFPA, for inspiring and guiding us on the topic of this report, and to Azza Karam, Sherin Saadallah, Mona Kaidbey, Ziad Mikati, Prateek Awasthi, Sylvia Wong, and Christian Fuersich as well as to the members of UNFPA's Global Youth Advisory Panel for their inputs and support, to Teo for his research assistance and in particular to Grita, Daniel, Tsehay, Jiigee, Kim, Seif and Leire for sharing with us their life stories.

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This is the third edition of the *Youth Supplement to UNFPA's State of the World Population Report*. The 2008 Report focuses on the interactions among culture, gender, and human rights and the critical importance of culturally sensitive approaches for effective development policies and programmes. The Youth Supplement addresses culture as it shapes and nurtures the lives of young people and shows how young people develop their own subcultures, which are often different from and may conflict with the dominant culture. The *Supplement* points out the value to young people of protecting the culture in which they grew up, but it speaks on behalf of their right to embrace their own cultures in their own ways.

Young people's cultural experience is layered like an onion, each layer revealing different aspects. As young people become adults and move out of their parents' orbit, they can become agents of positive change: they have the dynamism and flexibility, but also the perseverance required to make change from within. Development programmes should help them make the most of their opportunities. *The Youth Supplement* demonstrates through young people's own

stories how they influence change within their own cultures, championing human rights, gender equality and development.

The Supplement profiles the lives of young women and men from seven countries. They promote gender sensitivity in religious institutions (Colombia), oppose traditional harmful practices such as child marriage (Ethiopia); adapt international modern music to their own societies and use it to call for healthy behaviours (Vietnam); challenge gender stereotypes in sports (Mozambique); promote peace in place of political and armed violence (Occupied Palestinian Territory); use information and communication technologies to promote development (Mongolia), and encourage youth participation in government, even taking high office (Spain).

*The State of World Population Report 2008* says it is crucial to incorporate culture into development policy and programming, especially in sensitive areas like sexual and reproductive health. The Report points out that bringing a cultural lens to bear on human rights helps all levels of society and all communities and groups to make human rights principles their own, making them part of their value system.

Human rights belong to everyone in every country: but they will become universal in practice only when individuals and communities find ways to articulate human rights in terms of their own cultures. The Millennium Development Goals and the goals of the International Conference on Population and Development emerged from local and personal experience. They will be fully achieved when their human rights basis is well integrated locally and when change comes from within the communities themselves. The *Youth Supplement of the State of the World Population Report* illustrates how that process can work for young people today.



**About Culture:** The *State of World Population Report 2008: Reaching Common Ground: Culture, Gender and Human Rights* says that “culture” means “inherited patterns of shared meanings and common understandings”. Culture influences how people manage their lives, and provides a lens through which they interpret their society.

Cultures are neither homogeneous nor static. Within each culture, there are groups of people with distinctive sets of behaviours and beliefs that set them apart from the larger culture. A subculture may be defined by the age of its members; by race, ethnicity, class or gender; by religious or political beliefs, or by profession. Individuals and groups within a culture also contest and change cultural values or practices that inflict harm or infringe human rights. Culture is a dynamic construct made by people themselves: people can bring about change that allows the articulation and realization of community values and practices in line with individual human rights.

Cultures are dynamic: they do not stand still. Global, regional and national factors make an impact on economies, societies, and environments. Cultures respond by accepting or rejecting new ways of thinking

and doing – or by finding a middle way if that is possible – and adjusting values and behaviours to deal with them.

**The Young Generation and Cultural Change:** As they grow through adolescence, young people develop their identity and become autonomous individuals. At the same time they acquire responsibilities and become part of their society.

Young people do not share their elders’ experiences and memories. They develop their own ways of perceiving, appreciating, classifying and distinguishing issues, and the codes, symbols and language in which to express them.

Young people’s responses to the changing world, and their unique ways of explaining and communicating their experience, can help transform their cultures and ready their societies to meet new challenges.

Many factors influence cultural change: new information and communication technologies; levels of health, education, nutrition and employment; economic progress or stagnation; political stability or violence, greater or less poverty. Young people live cultural change with more intensity than their elders,

and their influence on culture is more visible than on the economy or politics<sup>1</sup>. Their dynamism can change some of the archaic and harmful aspects of their cultures that older generations take to be immutable.

Young people are as diverse as their societies. Different social, economic, residential, marital, ethnic, and religious backgrounds give each individual his or her own cultural ethos. The key to success in enabling young people to promote change is to accept their cultural framework and work in partnership with them.

This is especially important for marginalized groups, such as very young adolescent girls in societies where harmful traditions survive. Culturally-sensitive approaches to promote human rights can end practices such as child marriage and female genital mutilation/cutting. They can remove impediments to age-appropriate information and services for sexual and reproductive health, and help to end violence and discrimination.

### **The Changing Cultural Context:**

There are more than 1.5 billion people between the ages of 10 and 24, the largest generation in human history. Approximately

## INTRODUCTION

70 per cent live in developing countries, 60 per cent in Asia alone<sup>2</sup>. They enter adulthood in a time of transformations in the economy, education, communication, demographics, the environment, technologies and culture.

Globalization is this generation's hallmark, with free flow of markets, capital and products; easier travel, instant connections, and rapid urbanization, with more than half of world population living in cities and towns. The result is economic and cultural integration on a scale never before seen, with a tremendous impact on every aspect of life.

This generation of young people is also shaped by a trend towards democracy and the rise of civil society, giving them much more opportunity to participate in local and national decision-making.

Young people, especially girls, are more

the same shopping malls, fast food chains, clothing stores, music clubs, and reality TV shows. Mass media shapes young people's tastes and trends. Music Television International (MTV), for example, which has a presence in most countries of the world, transmits not only music but aspirations, codes, values, behaviours and tastes. Internet cafes have become meeting places, especially for young men. Cellular phones are found everywhere in urban centres, and as a communal service in villages and poor communities.

Rural areas have less access to the global youth culture: though mobile phones and the Internet are spreading, information, ideas and popular culture still travel largely through radio and sometimes TV.

Globalization and the global culture have made everyone aware of consumption possi-

**Interactions between traditional and global codes and values:** Young people are absorbing new ideas, values, beliefs and codes through the connected world, mass media and new information technologies; but they are also growing up with the traditional cultural values of their own societies. This blending of local and globalized cultures may become more like a collision, with accompanying tensions and challenges.

Exposure to new information has both positive and negative sides. With very little opportunity to find out about sexual and reproductive health through their families or at school, for example, young people get information through the Internet, often from their peers. Although this is better than no information at all, young people may come to believe rumours, myths or "urban legends". Some people feel that unfiltered infor-

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