

On Women's Health and Rights  
Lectures, Speeches and Statements  
Mahmoud F. Fathalla

**Towards a world that women deserve**  
**United Nations Population Award**  
**Acceptance statement**  
**United Nations, New York, June 1, 2009**

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;
- a world 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 no woman shall have to give her life to give life, as the UN Secretary General challenged the recent World Health Assembly on May 19.
- 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.

**UNITED NATIONS  
THE SECRETARY-GENERAL**

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**REMARKS AT THE UN POPULATION AWARD CEREMONY  
1 June 2009**

Mr. Chairman,  
Madame Obaid, Executive Director of UNFPA,  
Members of the Committee for the United Nations Population Award,  
Excellencies,  
Ladies and Gentlemen,  
I am pleased to welcome you to this important ceremony.  
I thank the inter-governmental Committee for the United Nations Population Award  
whose members are here this evening.

You all know that population issues are not about numbers – they are about people. When we speak of maternal mortality, we are not just talking about statistics; we are dealing with tragic deaths. And when we urge action, we are not trying to reduce population growth; we are trying to help individuals to exercise their rights. The winners we recognize this evening understand the importance of this struggle. And they have devoted themselves to advancing the cause. Please join me in a warm round of applause for our two winners: Dr. Mahmoud Fahmy Fathalla, a Professor from Assiut University in Egypt, and the Movimiento Comunal Nicaragüense of Nicaragua.

Mr. Chairman,  
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Dr. Fathalla has made a major impact in the field of family planning, reproductive rights and ending maternal deaths. He helped to found the “Safe Motherhood Initiative”, which is saving women from dying in pregnancy and childbirth. People around the world respect Dr. Fathalla’s expertise and advocacy. Many international organizations rely on his advice. He has worked with UNDP, UNFPA, WHO and the World Bank as they help developing countries. I especially applaud his recognition of the important role of women in contraceptive research.

Dr. Fathalla is influencing national and global population strategies. And he founded one of the first family planning organizations in the Arab world: the Egyptian Fertility Care society, set up in 1974. To this day, he remains a valued advisor to the Egyptian Family Planning Association, the Ministry of Health and the National Population Council.

Dr. Fathalla combines a solid medical background with an ability to communicate. His video “Why did Mrs. X die?” has raised awareness throughout the world.

Dr. Fathalla has shown how science, academics and advocacy can come together to help the women of the world. He richly deserves the UN Population Award.

Mr. Chairman,

It is also my pleasure to congratulate our second laureate: the Movimiento Comunal Nicaragüense of Nicaragua, a non-governmental organization bringing together communities to improve life for the country's people. The MCN focuses on development, gender equality and environmental protection. It has trained people in more than 2,000 communities, and has mobilized an impressive 20,000 people, including leaders, educators and midwives, to improve public health.

Through these efforts, the MCN has contributed to major successes, including increases in literacy, the eradication of polio and the reduction of maternal and child mortality rates. It has also improved conditions for Nicaraguans by focusing on youth, gender relations, domestic violence, sexually transmitted diseases and early pregnancies.

With strong partnerships from the government, non-governmental groups and international organizations, the MCN is expanding its good work to empower individuals and help communities claim their right to health. For these reasons and more, the MCN has earned tonight's recognition.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Excellencies,

Let us give another round of applause to our two very distinguished and deserving laureates.

As we strive to uphold the ideals of the United Nations Charter, we can take inspiration from their outstanding work. Let us build a world where women do not die needlessly in childbirth; where girls get the education they deserve; where young people are protected from HIV; and where couples can decide how many children to have.

Seeing these winners tonight, I am all the more determined to do my part to address population and reproductive health. All of us – governments, civil society groups and international institutions – must work together to put these issues at the heart of the development agenda.

On behalf of the United Nations, I congratulate the winners for their achievements and wish them all the best as they continue their invaluable work for the wellbeing and progress of the world's people.

Thank you very much.