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## **Top UN officials debate role of culture in women's empowerment**



UNESCO Director General Irina Bokova

30 June 2010 – The role of culture in promoting the empowerment of women and upholding human rights was hotly debated today by senior United Nations officials, activists and academics as the UN Economic and Social Council ([ECOSOC](#)) meets in New York to push for women and girls to be at the forefront of efforts to achieve development targets.

"Laws are important, but they're not sufficient because often traditions are stronger than the implementation of laws," Thoraya Ahmed Obaid, Executive Director of the UN Population Fund ([UNFPA](#)), told a televised debate conducted at UN Headquarters in New York.

She underscored the importance of working with communities to "access the positive values of human rights that any community would have."

With "value-loaded" issues such as reproductive health, adolescent sexuality and violence against women topping UNFPA's agenda, "we have to face that they are impacted by culture," which Ms. Obaid linked to identity.

Irina Bokova, Director-General of the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization ([UNESCO](#)), acknowledged that "cultural diversity is an important aspect of what is happening in the world nowadays," but stressed that "it should never be an excuse to violate the rights of women."

Also speaking at today's debate, launched by the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DESA) and UN Television and part of the *Face to Face* series, was Kavita N. Ramdas, who heads the non-governmental organization (NGO) Global Fund for Women.

Culture, she said, is not static, but rather, constantly changing as a result of internal and external factors.

"In almost every culture in the world, women have been held up as the vessels to hold and promote and move forward traditions," Ms. Ramdas said. "At the same time, culture is far too often used as a veil or as an excuse or the rug under which a series of ills – including violence, abuse and discrimination – are simply swept under."

Rounding out the panellists at the event was Kwame Anthony Appiah, professor at Princeton University, who underscored the dynamism and lack of homogeneity within cultures and questioned the reliance on culture as the answer to all problems.

"Very often, people say, 'it's our culture,' as if that's supposed to settle the question," he said. "First of all, it's not always clear what our culture is, but second, even if it is, it's up for change."

The focus of this year's high-level ECOSOC segment, which kicked off on Monday, "allows us to strengthen the links between gender equality, women's human rights and non-discrimination as a basis for progress in development goals, including the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs)," said the body's President Hamidoun Ali, referring to the eight goals that world leaders have agreed to try to realize before their 2015 deadline.

For his part, Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon told government ministers at the high-level segment opening that "until women and girls are liberated from poverty and injustice, all our goals – peace, security, sustainable development – stand in jeopardy."

He noted that this year is a "landmark year for gender issues" with the 15th anniversary of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action – which remains the most comprehensive global policy framework to achieve the goals of gender equality, development and peace – and the 10th anniversary of Security Council resolution 1325 on women and peace and security.

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