

High-Level Task Force for ICPD

RIGHTS, DIGNITY & HEALTH FOR ALL

Press Release

Sexual and Reproductive Rights are Not ‘New’ Rights, Says UN High Commissioner for Human Rights

United Nations, New York, 8 April 2014 – Although sometimes considered controversial, sexual and reproductive rights are not ‘new’ rights, but “are intrinsic to a range of internationally binding treaties.”

That was one of the messages in the keynote address by UN High Commissioner for Human Rights [Navi Pillay](#), speaking at a side event, *Celebrating Cairo and Going Beyond*, organized by the High-Level Task Force for the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) on the occasion of the Commission on Population and Development.

“Sexual and reproductive rights are human rights,” said the High Commissioner. “They are not new rights, and they are not optional. At the very core of these rights is the right to autonomy, which involves deeply personal issues such as whether, when, how and with whom any individual chooses to have sex; whether, when, and whom one chooses to marry; whether, when, how and with whom one chooses to have children; and how we choose to express gender and sexuality.”

The common touchstone of the ICPD and other major agreements on human rights and gender equality, she said, “is the fundamental dignity and autonomy of every human being. In the resonant words of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights.”

“We know what equality should look like,” she added. “International standards list the necessary measures... But we need to ingrain a culture of human rights into the hearts and minds of many leaders. We need to overcome resistance to sexual and reproductive rights, which are such a key part of human rights law and of the ICPD’s Programme of Action.”

The ICPD, held in Cairo in 1994, was the first agreement to highlight the centrality of rights related to sexuality and reproduction – particularly for women and young people – as central to global sustainable development, several speakers noted. They also pointed out that now, at its 20 year review, its core commitment to universal access to sexual and reproductive health remains unfulfilled, at great cost, as statistics reveal.

H.E. Joaquim Chissano: Forging a global agenda for the 21st Century

“By the end of today and each of the next days, 800 women and adolescent girls will die from pregnancy-related causes,” said [Joaquim Chissano](#), Co-Chair of the High-Level Task Force and former President of Mozambique. “In the next 24 hours, 2,500 young people will acquire HIV. And by tomorrow, 39,000 girls under 18 will have been forced into marriage. If we had all lived up to our Cairo commitments, these scenarios would be very different. We would be saving and improving many more lives, and would be on a certain path to a more equal, prosperous world for all.”

Signaling the optimistic and forward-looking tone of the event, President Chissano affirmed: “We’re here to recommit ourselves to making good on our promises, as well as celebrate our aspirations for ‘going beyond’ Cairo and forging a global agenda suited to 21st century realities....The evidence is irrefutable. Sexual and reproductive rights are at the very heart of people-centred sustainable development, keys to unleashing the full potential of all humanity.”

Alluding to the 20-year review as well as the post-2015 development agenda, Chissano said, “We are at a defining moment. We must stay on the right side of history, by standing up for equality, and the rights and freedoms of all - for the sake of both present and for future generations. And we must act ... from a place of courage, not fear.”

Ishita Chaudhry: Speaking up for the rights and participation of young people

Task Force Member [Ishita Chaudhry](#) of India spoke of the human rights violations against women and girls she has witnessed in her country, as well as acts of courage on the part of young women that inspired her life of activism. Now as a leading international advocate for the rights of young people, she expressed her frustration that the rights of women and girls get short shrift in international negotiations. “I will never understand how it is acceptable to trade off on the health and human rights of half the world’s population,” she said.

“There is such deep irony,” she continued, “in us being uncomfortable with girls getting married at the age of 9 and having children at the age of 12, but blocking their access to comprehensive sexuality education.”

She encouraged young people to be leaders and hold their governments and the international community accountable for making good on their commitments to sexual and reproductive rights and address the root cause of poverty, violence and discrimination. “You cannot be afraid of challenging injustice, because change is needed and this is the only way our societies will change.”

Ms. Chaudhry closed with a message to the decision-makers involved in the ICPD Beyond 2014 negotiations this week: “My generation looks to see how you will leave your footprints at this moment in history. The lives of millions of young women and girls, including mine, depend on it.Twenty years from today we hope to be able to look back to this CPD, and celebrate your courage.”

Chaudhry also introduced the [video](#) “It’s Your Fault”, made by a group of young people in India, that uses satire and humor to expose attitudes that perpetuate sexual violence against women.

Mariela Castro: Sexual and Reproductive Rights Belong to Everyone

[Mariela Castro Espin](#), a Member of the High-Level Task Force and of the Parliament of Cuba, noted that “the basic right of people to make decisions and take control of their sexuality and their bodies, without discrimination, manipulation, coercion or violence, was recognized by the international community in Cairo and Beijing 20 years ago.”

Sexual and reproductive rights, she said, “are inherent to all people, as part of their human condition, independent of their class and social status, their age, gender, marital status, migration status, ethnicity, race, sexual orientation and gender identity.”

Political will and social transformation are needed to create an environment in which all people can fully exercise these rights. She highlighted comprehensive sexuality education as an important tool policy that gives people greater freedom to make responsible decisions. “It is the responsibility of governments to develop national comprehensive sexuality education programs, with attention to sexual and reproductive health, with a human rights-based approach,” Ms. Castro said. Comprehensive sexuality education helps foster “justice, equity, participation and social cohesion.”

Wanda Nowicka: Parliamentarians need to enable the fulfillment of rights, not stand in their way.

[Wanda Nowicka](#), Deputy Speaker of Poland’s Lower House of Parliament and Member of the High-Level Task Force for the ICPD, spoke of the special responsibility lawmakers share “to ensure that laws, policies and budgets *enable* the fulfillment of sexual and reproductive health and rights, rather than stand in their way,” adding, “We must base public policy and legislation on science and facts, not ideology or misconceptions.”

Ms. Nowicka outlined some of the Task Force’s [legal and policy recommendations](#) for promoting and protecting sexual and reproductive rights, including: ending impunity for perpetrators of gender-based violence, abolishing early and forced marriage and other harmful practices against women and girls, ensuring that pregnancy and motherhood are not barriers to women’s and girls’ full participation in education and employment, and eliminating legal barriers to information and services, such as parental and spousal consent requirements. She also pointed to the need to end discrimination, harassment and violence based on HIV status, sexual orientation and gender identity. “Our responsibility, as policymakers, is to guarantee equality before the law and non-discrimination for all people,” she said. “This is a basic pillar of the rule of law, democracy and progressive societies.”

Ms. Nowicka also spoke frankly about the issue of safe abortion. “If we want to get serious about saving lives and addressing social injustice, we need to tackle unsafe abortion, which kills tens of thousands of adolescent girls and women each year, disproportionately affecting the young and poor,” she said. “We

need to treat unsafe abortion as the public health issue that it is, and end punitive measures that put women, girls and doctors in jail for seeking or giving life-saving care; and revise laws to expand access to safe abortion.”

Dr. Babatunde Osotimehin: To go beyond Cairo we must be united

"We all know that there can be no sustainable development without moving the sexual and reproductive rights agenda forward," said the head of UNFPA, the lead UN agency for supporting implementation of the ICPD Programme of Action.

He recalled the concerted effort – especially of civil society and women’s groups – that made the original ICPD agreement possible, and called for a similar effort at this critical moment, “to go beyond” Cairo in the ICPD Beyond 2014. “We have to be courageous and strong. ... We believe that the global movement of sexual and reproductive health and rights will be fulfilled. I am confident we will be able to advance. In fact, we may be unstoppable.”

The event was co-hosted by the Governments of Argentina, Brazil, Finland, Germany, Liberia, Mexico, Mongolia, Mozambique, Papua New Guinea, the Philippines, Slovenia and South Africa, and closed with brief remarks from their and Nepal’s heads of national delegations and other high-level representatives to the Commission on Population and Development, supporting the Task Force calls to make good on their Cairo commitments and go beyond to fully achieve sexual and reproductive health and rights in the next 20 years.

The program included a video message from UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon and concluded with a rousing musical performance by Tony Award nominee Constantine Maroulis and Luis Salgado and the young performers in training from [R.Evolución Latina](#).

Related links:

For more information about the High-Level Task Force for the ICPD and its policy recommendations for the ICPD Beyond 2014 and the Post-2015 Development Agenda, visit the website, <http://www.icpdtaskforce.org/>

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