

High-Level Task Force for ICPD

RIGHTS, DIGNITY & HEALTH FOR ALL

Panel Urges Leaders to Fulfill Promise of Gender Equality in the Post-2015 Development Agenda

Call for a focus on the human rights of women and young people, including sexual and reproductive health and rights

United Nations, New York, March 11, 2014 – If sexual and reproductive health and rights had been a focus of the Millennium Development Goals, we would live in a different world today, according to **Dr. Nafis Sadik**, who served as Secretary-General of the 1994 International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD), in a side event during the Commission on the Status of Women.

Dr. Sadik lamented the fact that the ICPD's key commitment to sexual and reproductive health for all, made 20 years ago in Cairo, had essentially "fallen off the table," resulting in unnecessary hardship and suffering, especially for women and adolescent girls.

Other participants on the panel, entitled *Fulfilling the Promise of Gender Equality: Women, Girls & the Post-2015 Agenda*, included the Crown Princess of Denmark, the head of UNAIDS, a youth activist from the Caribbean, the Director of the National Institute for Women of Uruguay. The event was organized by the High-Level Task Force for the ICPD, co-hosted by the Governments of Denmark and Uruguay, and moderated by Lynne Featherstone, Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for International Development, United Kingdom.

In expressing their priorities for the Sustainable Development Goals and Post-2015 Development Agenda being discussed at the United Nations, panelists called for greater attention to human rights, with emphasis on women, young people and especially vulnerable groups; a standalone goal on gender equality; eliminating violence against women and girls; and sexual and reproductive health and rights, including universal access to sexual and reproductive health services, and comprehensive sexuality education for all young people for their safe transitions to adulthood.

"It is clear that gender equality is not recognized universally, and discrimination and gender-based violence continue to prevail in many societies," said **Crown Princess Mary of Denmark**, a member of the High-Level Task Force for ICPD.

"We need to address these issues from many angles in the new development agenda, and with a strong focus on adolescent girls," said the Crown Princess. "All girls should be able to complete their education - not get kicked out of school because they are pregnant or mothers, or because they live with HIV. All girls and women must be able to decide if, when and with whom to marry and have children. And for all of this, they need their rights recognized and they need access to quality sexual and reproductive health services, information and education."

The Crown Princess continued by pointing out that "For many young people, the realization that they have rights comes as a revelation. . . They know they need this information. And they want it."

"They say what girls don't know won't hurt them," said Dr. Sadik, echoing the calls for comprehensive sexuality education and related services for adolescents, "But it's just the opposite:

what girls don't know frequently will hurt them— ending sometimes in death.” Some 16 million adolescents give birth each year, and in many countries, complications from pregnancy and childbearing is the leading cause of death for adolescent girls.

“If we really want to eradicate preventable deaths of women and girls, we need to tackle unsafe abortion,” Dr. Sadik added, noting that while substantial progress has been made in reducing maternal mortality, the proportion of deaths due to unsafe abortion “has not moved.” “Governments need to pay attention. They haven't looked at all the causes,” said Dr. Sadik.

The Government of Uruguay *is* reflecting upon and addressing the causes, according to **Ms. Beatriz Ramírez Abella**, Director of National Institute for Women of Uruguay's Ministry for Social Development. Since 2001, Uruguay has expanded its sexual and reproductive health services, and in 2012 followed that up with an initiative to reduce death and disability from unsafe abortion by treating this as a public health issue rather than a legal or criminal matter. “The recent law on the voluntary interruption of pregnancy not only guaranteed the rights of women and girls but also emphasized the health sector's role in reducing maternal mortality,” said Ms. Abella. Sexuality education is also a strong focus she said, adding, “These policies complement each other.”

Ms. Abella cited progress on these issues across the region as well. Recent landmark consensus agreements, such as that forged in Montevideo on the ICPD Beyond 2014 and in Santo Domingo to advance towards gender equality, with their affirmation of sexual and reproductive health and rights, serve as pathways to full gender equality, she said. Looking ahead, Ms. Abella mentioned the need for more emphasis on equality in political and economic participation and decision-making at all levels, an end to gender wage gaps, and to the multiple forms of discrimination faced by Afro-descendent women and other marginalized groups.

Panelists all decried the ways in which gender-based violence -- including sexual violence and harmful practices such as early and forced marriage and female genital mutilation—are egregious human rights violations and undermine gender equality. Guaranteeing survivors of sexual violence comprehensive post-rape care and support, including emergency contraception, post-exposure prophylaxis to prevent HIV, and access to safe abortion, is another hard-won commitment – agreed to at last year's CSW—that remains unfulfilled, Dr. Sadik noted.

Ms. Amina Doherty, a youth activist and Board Member of the Global Fund for Women, with roots in Nigeria and the Caribbean, spoke of the ways in which her generation, equipped with new technologies and bolstered by a global youth culture, is using its resourcefulness to promote positive change.

But she called on global leaders to do their part, by backing up commitments on paper with resources. “We're tired of lip service and of ‘youth’ being a buzzword. We're invited to the United Nations, but we still don't see our issues on the agenda. We are the largest generation of young people in history, but are still left out of decision-making. We want our issues represented in reality,” she said.

“Resources are available,” said Ms. Doherty, “but what are we using them for?” She noted that the world's military spending in 2011 was enough to meet the funding gap for all reproductive, maternal and child health areas of the MDGs in the world's poorest countries – 121 times over.

In addition to adequate resourcing, she said the post-2015 agenda should have a standalone goal on youth that reflects their priorities--including their sexual and reproductive health and rights -- a matter of survival for young people.

Michel Sidibé, Executive Director of UNAIDS, pointed to the links between gender inequality and the HIV epidemic, noting that in some high-prevalence places the ratio of young women living with HIV is dramatically higher than for their male counterparts. “We’ll not end this epidemic if we don’t have courage to focus on the ones left behind: young girls and women,” he said, adding that this is fundamentally a rights issue.

He also emphasized the need for a “data revolution”, enabled by scientific advances and innovations, to create evidence-based policies and improve accountability. “We must measure what we treasure,” he said. “We need to know where the gaps are, who is left behind.”

The panel called on the international community to take what was learned from the Millennium Development Goals and do better in the post-2015 development agenda. “Since we know what works, and we know what to do, we just need to do it, or we will fail to save lives. Ideology and false value systems should not stand in the way of doing the right thing,” said Dr. Sadik.

Moderator Lynne Featherstone closed by highlighting the obligation of *everyone* to work to fulfill the promise of gender equality in the next development framework. “Increasing social, economic and political equality– including sexual and reproductive health and rights – is the basis for empowerment and sustainable growth,” she concluded.

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Panelists:

Her Royal Highness **Crown Princess Mary of Denmark**, Member of the High-Level Task Force for ICPD

Ms. Beatriz Ramírez Abella
Director of the National Institute for Women,
Ministry for Social Development, Uruguay

Mr. Michel Sidibé
Executive Director, UNAIDS

Dr. Nafis Sadik
Secretary-General of the ICPD

Ms. Amina Doherty
Youth Leader, Antigua and Barbuda/Nigeria
Board Member, Global Fund for Women

Moderator: **Ms. Lynne Featherstone MP**
Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for
International Development, United Kingdom

Related links:

Photos and webcast of the panel: <http://www.icpdtaskforce.org/news-events/fulfilling-the-promise-gender-equality.html>

Overview of the High-Level Task Force for ICPD’s policy Priorities for the Post-2015 Agenda
<http://www.icpdtaskforce.org/post-2015/priorities.html>

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