

High-Level Task Force for ICPD

RIGHTS, DIGNITY & HEALTH FOR ALL

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The High-Level Task Force for the ICPD calls on African leaders to accelerate efforts for achieving gender equality, the empowerment of women and young people and sexual and reproductive health and rights.

(Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. 3 October 2013) Today, the High-Level Task Force for the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) launched its policy recommendations in Africa, calling on the region's top decision-makers to step up political will and investments for advancing gender equality, the empowerment of women and young people, and sexual and reproductive health and rights – fundamental human rights issues and also critical for the sustainable development of the region.

This call was issued at a press conference held during the African Regional Conference on Population and Development, organized by the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (ECA), the African Union (AU) and the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA). The Conference brings together government officials from the region to review the progress made in implementing the ICPD Programme of Action adopted in Cairo in 1994, and to chart the way forward for the ICPD Beyond 2014.

The Task Force calls on African governments to heed the following four key recommendations, urging their incorporation as priority objectives in both the regional agenda for Cairo beyond 2014 and the new post-2015 global development agenda:

1. Respect, protect and fulfill sexual and reproductive rights for all - through legal and policy reforms and public education campaigns and community mobilization on human rights;
2. Accelerate universal access to quality, comprehensive and integrated sexual and reproductive health information, education and services;
3. Guarantee universal access to comprehensive sexuality education for all young people, in and out of school; and,
4. Eliminate violence against women and girls and secure universal access to critical services for all victims and survivors of gender-based violence.

These recommendations were outlined at the press conference by Task Force Co-Chair **former President Joaquim Chissano of Mozambique**, and Members **Holo Hachonda**, Program Director at Broad Reach Healthcare in **Zambia**; and **Bience Gawanas**, Special Advisor to the Minister of Health in **Namibia** and former Commissioner for Social Affairs at the African Union. (Other Members of the Task Force from the region are **Dr. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus**, Minister of Foreign Affairs of **Ethiopia**, **Dr. Lola Dare**, Chief Executive Officer of the Centre for Health Sciences Training, Research and Development in **Nigeria**; and **Leymah Gbowee**, Nobel Peace Laureate from **Liberia**.)

President Chissano opened the launch acknowledging that while progress has been made in the region in implementing the ICPD Programme of Action, Africa faces some of the world's starkest realities. Over half of the 800 maternal deaths that occur globally each day are in sub-Saharan Africa; over half of the region's adolescent girls give birth before age 20; thirteen million girls have been forced into marriage before 18 years old, increasing their risks of domestic violence, early child-bearing and persistent poverty; 4 million youth in the region are infected with HIV; and over 45% of women and girls over 15 experience physical

and/or sexual violence in their lifetime.

These are, however, “preventable problems with proven, cost-effective solutions,” said **Chissano**. “Solving them is a matter of political will, backed up by resources to ensure our promises can be fulfilled.... What the High-Level Task Force for the ICPD proposes is not only the right thing to do; it is common sense. No country can afford to forgo opportunities to make the empowerment of women and young people, and sexual and reproductive health and rights, a reality in the 21st Century. These are priorities that must also be reflected as pillars of any sound post-2015 development agenda: the exercise of these human rights is essential to achieving poverty reduction and inclusive, sustainable development, by fully unleashing human potential, energies and talents—especially of our women and young people.”

Among its priority recommendations, the Task Force calls on countries in the region to adopt legal and policy reforms to ensure all people can enjoy their sexual and reproductive rights. These include ending impunity for all forms of gender-based violence, including domestic and sexual violence; ensuring all survivors of gender-based violence receive critical services, supports and access to justice, including post-rape care for all victims of sexual assault; removing legal, policy, financial and cultural barriers that prevent access to sexual and reproductive health services, including parental or spousal consent requirements, and ensuring commodities and services are free or affordable for all; eliminating early and forced marriage and female genital mutilation within a generation; ending unsafe abortion as a major killer of women and adolescent girls and expanding access to safe, legal abortion services; and guaranteeing equality before the law and non-discrimination for all people, regardless of HIV or disability status, their sexual orientation and gender identity, or any other factor.

The Task Force strongly condemned the violence and discrimination endured by women and men in Africa based on their sexual orientation and gender identity. “Discrimination is discrimination,” said **Holo Hachonda**, “whether it’s based on gender, race, ethnicity, the country we come from, the faith we practice - or whether it’s based on sexual orientation and gender identity. Societies that exclude and harm people based on any single aspect of their identity are on a dangerous path of social exclusion, undermining fundamental human rights and human dignity.”

The Task Force also called attention to preventable deaths and needless suffering brought on women and adolescent girls by the rate of unsafe abortion in the region – the highest in the world, with over 5 million unsafe abortions performed each year, 25% of which are on adolescent girls. These unsafe abortions take the lives of over 27,000 women and girls from the region each year, injuring and disabling many more, and in the prime of their lives. “This is a matter of public health, social justice and equity”, **Hachonda** noted. “Women who can afford to, find a way to get a safe abortion. It’s women and girls living in poverty that are most often forced to resort to deadly, unsafe procedures.” The Task Force calls for repealing restrictive abortion legislation and ensuring that safe abortion services are accessible and affordable through the primary health care system.

The Task Force also placed great emphasis on fulfilling the sexual and reproductive rights of all adolescents and youth in the region – which at nearly 300 million, form the largest cohort of young people in the region’s history and make Africa the world’s most youthful continent. With the right policies in place, Task Force Members emphasized, Africa can meet the sexual and reproductive health needs of its young people while taking advantage of the ‘youth bulge’ to harness the benefits of the demographic dividend for increased economic growth and poverty reduction. Critical to this is ensuring that all young people have access to comprehensive sexuality education, in and out of school, and to youth-friendly sexual and reproductive health services. “Contrary to what some might believe or say”, **President Chissano** stated, “comprehensive sexuality education does not corrupt young people; it protects them. It holds the promise of lowering our staggering rate of adolescent pregnancy and stopping the spread of HIV, and instilling values of respect, tolerance and non-violence in this up-and-coming generation of Africans.”

The Task Force called on governments to make good on their Cairo promise to accelerate universal access to

quality, comprehensive sexual and reproductive health information and services, with emphasis on women and young people. For this promise to become a reality, they noted, governments must be held accountable and back their commitments with resources to strengthen Africa's health systems, and international development aid needs to keep pace with the need for sexual and reproductive health services. Noting that 53 million women in Africa would like to prevent pregnancy but lack effective access to contraception, **Bience Gawanas** argued that "fulfilling these commitments would not only save lives, it would save money." She cited research showing that increased investments in family planning would save developing countries \$5.7 billion dollars in maternal and newborn healthcare costs alone. "And that is savings that can be channeled into health, education, sanitation and infrastructure improvements, climate change adaptation and food security strategies", said **Gawanas**.

Gawanas continued by emphasizing the linkages between sexual and reproductive health and rights and gender-based violence, calling violence against women and girls one of the world's most pervasive human rights violations and a serious global public health problem. "Gender-based violence has been a silent culprit behind the feminization of HIV and AIDS," **Gawanas** stated, pointing out that young women in some parts of sub-Saharan Africa are nearly eight times as likely to be infected with HIV as young men. In addition to calling for detection and responses to gender-based violence to be an integral part of all sexual and reproductive health services, the Task Force also urged an end to impunity for all perpetrators of violence against women and girls as part of an overall effort to eliminate this scourge. **Gawanas** emphasized that "justice is perverted when perpetrators go free, and women and girls are shamed and blamed for crimes committed against them." The Task Force calls for efforts to mobilize boys and men, as teachers, health providers, religious leaders, journalists, parliamentarians and heads of state, to challenge the harmful gender norms that reproduce discrimination and violence, and to champion justice, equality and freedom for women and girls.

A statement issued by Task Force Member **Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus**, Minister of Foreign Affairs of **Ethiopia**, echoed a sentiment emphasized by all Members throughout the press conference. "Since the Cairo agreement, countries across Africa, including Ethiopia, have taken important measures towards fulfilling the sexual and reproductive health and rights of our people. Failure to accelerate implementation of the ICPD and related agreements robs us of our most precious natural resources -- the full energies and potential of our young people, of our women and girls, at the prime and most productive time of their lives. The Task Force policy recommendations are not optional issues for public policy. They are a must. Too much is at stake. We cannot afford to look the other way."

More information about the High-Level Task Force for the ICPD and its policy positions, in a variety of languages, can be found on its website: www.icpdtaskforce.org, and on Facebook.com/icpdtaskforce and Twitter: @ICPDTaskForce.

For more information on the African Regional Conference on Population and Development, visit: <http://www.uneca.org/icpd2014>.