

Oral statement on behalf of Ipas

Commission of Population and Development, 42<sup>nd</sup> Session, March 30<sup>th</sup> to April 29<sup>th</sup> 2009

Department of Economic and Social Affairs

Population Division

Thank you, Madame Chair,

My name is Laura Villa and I am speaking on behalf of Ipas, an international organization that has worked since 1973 to reduce deaths and injuries of women from unsafe abortion and to increase women's ability to exercise their sexual and reproductive rights.

2009 offers a great opportunity for the world to reflect on achievements since Cairo, and to evaluate whether in the next 5 years we can fulfill the promises that governments made 15 years ago.

The International Conference on Population and Development brought many very important advances. Key among these, are:

- adoption of a reproductive health and rights framework and approach to population and development; including everyone's right to decide on the number and spacing of their children;
- greater attention to young people's reproductive health and needs;
- recognition of the need of all women access to contraception and the health consequences for women of unsafe abortion and commitment by governments to address this critical public health issue, including by ensuring that where abortion is legal, it is safe.

Especially on behalf of the world's young people, today I want to remind you of those commitments and to urge you to give it more attention. Unsafe abortion remains a pervasive and neglected reproductive health problem. 19 million women face an unsafe abortion every year. In the 15 years since your governments met in Cairo, nearly a million women have lost their lives because they lacked access to safe abortion services. Almost half were under the age of 25. Many more have survived an unsafe abortion, but with great costs to their reproductive health, as unsafe abortion often results in long-term and chronic health problems, including reproductive tract infections and infertility. The women most at risk of suffering serious complications are young, poor and living in rural and marginalized urban areas.

The saddest part is that these deaths and injuries are completely preventable, but women and girls around the world lack access to sexuality education and reproductive health services that they need. Many also suffer from discrimination, violence (including sexual violence) and stigma that hinders their ability to make their own reproductive decisions safely or to enjoy healthy, loving, respectful sexual relationships.

What has been governments' response to this situation for the last 15 years? There have been positive steps in many countries. Emergency treatment for complications of unsafe abortion linked to family planning counseling, including emergency contraception, and services to help prevent repeat unintended pregnancy and unsafe abortion is more widely available, for example, but not nearly available enough.

There have been some other improvements in women's access to safe, legal abortion, prompted in part by new guidance issued by the World Health Organization in 2003. New and low cost technologies such as medical abortion are helping to make safe care available to women who lack access to even basic health care services.

In addition, since 1994, 24 countries have liberalized their abortion laws, and another 8 countries have broadened access to safe legal abortion through other measures, such as revision of health sector regulations, development of national standards and guidelines for abortion care, and court rulings. Such reforms have occurred despite the controversy the subject of abortion often generates, because leaders have recognized that access to safe abortion is not only a public health issue, but also a matter of ethics, social justice and human rights. In these cases, governments have recognized women's right to a healthy reproductive life. More broadly, more and more societies are having open dialogues around respecting and defending reproductive choices.

As we see some small advances, -that we always celebrate as great achievements-, we need to recognize that there is still much to be done, not only in terms of legislation, but in health services, community education, sexual violence and gender equality. We need to work hard to also avoid backlashes that provoke social division and cause indescribable harm to women, families and communities.

We also urge governments to actively involve young people in public dialogue about sexuality and reproductive health and in the design and delivery of related health programs. Doing so is the only way to understand and meet their needs effectively, and it has to be done consistently as this is a transitional period and each generation of young people brings with it a new way of living and experiencing their sexuality.

And we want to say this openly: the only way to reduce abortion-related maternal mortality and morbidity is to break down the taboo that shrouds women's experiences with abortion in secrecy and to provide women and girls with comprehensive reproductive health services that include sexuality education and comprehensive abortion care.

Governments are responsible for responding to the needs of all their citizens, for promoting public dialogue and for generating social consensus and reducing stigma around crucial issues such as legalizing abortion. We need public funding for research, training and services. We need political will from governments to undertake these dialogues under their political agendas. We are counting on you for your support.

Thank you.