



Statement by the Hon. Rosy Senanayake, MP, Minister of State for Child Affairs of the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka at the 48th Session of the Commission on Population and Development

Madam Chairperson,

Let me begin by congratulating you and the other Bureau Members for the exemplary way in which you are coordinating the 48th Session of the Commission on Population and Development.

It gives me great pleasure to address this 48th Session of the CPD on behalf of the Government of Sri Lanka and in my capacity as the State Minister for Child Affairs.

At the outset, I would like to state that 20 years ago the ICPD Programme of Action committed governments to deliver inclusive, equitable, and sustainable development; development that placed an individual's rights, freedom, and dignity at the core of its mandate. It is a mandate that we hope to build on and consolidate when implementing domestic efforts to overcome demographic challenges.

Sri Lanka has enjoyed significant progress in its social and economic indicators. Additionally, Sri Lanka is one of the few countries in Asia that has a sex ratio favourable to women. In this context, Sri Lanka's advancement in light of changing demographics will ultimately depend on its ability to enable women and young people to be active participants in the country's development agenda. This requires an increase in sustained investment targeted at gender equality and social protection.

Women constitute a little more than half the population in Sri Lanka but only 34% of the labour force. Unemployment amongst women is more than twice as high as unemployment amongst men.

In Sri Lanka, women migrant workers and women in the plantation and export processing sectors bring in significant foreign exchange earnings to the country. However, a majority of women who participate in the labour force do so in the informal sector. This leaves them vulnerable to exploitation and abuse during their course of employment. Women also bear primary responsibility for care work – which creates multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination that limits the opportunities for their full integration into the workforce.

The Government of Sri Lanka recognises that inclusive development rests on ensuring equality of opportunity in work. As such, we are firmly committed to making the necessary legal and structural investments to bolster a decent work agenda in marginalised sectors.

These investments demand a broader discussion on the value of female participation in development. In this respect, the availability and promotion of sexual and reproductive health and rights; instituting robust mechanisms to prevent violence against women and girls; and strengthening measures to bring perpetrators of violence to justice are critical in ensuring that Sri Lanka's 'demographic dividend' can be leveraged.

Introduction of family planning services to Sri Lanka by the Family Planning Association was well integrated into maternal and child health services and later expanded to reduce the stigma surrounding contraception. This strategy accounted for more than 80% decline in fertility.

Additionally, the Government of Sri Lanka, through my Ministry, has introduced a scheme that provides a monthly nutritional supplement to all pregnant women in the country to reduce rates of anaemia, low birth weight and malnutrition - which affects both mother and baby.

However, despite the above Sri Lanka still faces the problem of unsafe abortions, unintended and teenage pregnancies, which pose significant challenges to the health and well-being of women and adolescents. In this respect, strengthening comprehensive reproductive education through school curriculums can help young people access accurate information on gender, sexuality, sexually transmitted infections including HIV and increase their awareness on the effective use of contraception.

As Sri Lanka emerges from 30 years of conflict, challenges in conflict-affected areas still remain. Currently over 23.4% households are headed by women. To combat these demographic pressures, the Prime Minister of Sri Lanka has set up a National Committee on Female-Headed Households and a National Centre for Female Headed Households - enabling female heads of households to integrate into the workforce and access sustainable livelihoods.

Sri Lanka recognises that while it has made progress on its development indicators, its women are lagging behind. As such, enhancing the economic potential for women is critical. For this, we need to create systems and attitudes where women have the opportunity to decide on the number and timing of their children, to control their reproductive choices, to go to work without the fear of violence or coercion, and aspire to equitable representation in decision making in the public domain. This is a task that we cannot hope to achieve alone. In overcoming development challenges, we invite civil society organisations, both local and international, to partner with us.

In conclusion Madam Chairperson, Sri Lanka pledges its fullest support for realizing the human right to development and the implementation of the ICPD -Programme of Action and the Beijing Platform for Action and its outcome documents from the 20 years review processes.

I thank you.