

*Keynote Address by
Her Majesty Queen Mother Gyalyum Sangay Choden Wangchuck
To the 54th Commission on Population and Development*

Mr. Chairman
Deputy Secretary-General of the United Nations
Members of the Commission
Distinguished Delegates,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

I bring you warm greetings and good wishes from their Majesties the Kings, the Royal Government and the People of Bhutan.

It is a great honor and a privilege to address the 54th Session of the Commission on Population and Development. I am confident that the objectives and goals of the commission will be fulfilled under the dynamic leadership of the Chair, Ambassador Yemdaogo Eric Tiare of Burkina Faso.

Global initiatives to advance women's rights to promote their social and economic development have yielded significant results in the last 25 years since the ICPD. Maternal mortality has dropped by nearly half and contraceptive use is higher than it has ever been. Expanded access to anti-retroviral therapy and declining incidences of HIV infections has greatly reduced the number of HIV related deaths.

The introduction of the HPV vaccines has addressed the pertinent public health problem of preventable diseases such as cervical cancer and reduced the suffering caused by this disease. Furthermore, the global gender gap in education has narrowed, women are rising to the top of their fields, and their political participation worldwide continues to grow.

As we celebrate these achievements, we must recognize the challenges that remain. Too many women and girls around the world are still marginalized, living at or below the poverty line, with far too little control over their reproductive health and choices. Maternal mortality is still a leading cause of death and gender equality and women's rights continue to remain a global issue.

The COVID-19 pandemic has deepened and perpetuated inequalities and vulnerabilities for women and girls, highlighting gaps in policies and systems. The implementation of lockdowns has escalated domestic violence, sexual exploitation and adolescent pregnancy. Health care systems have failed to provide reliable maternal and neonatal services.

Additionally, loss of jobs, precarious economic situations, food scarcity, increased domestic work burden, parenting stress and limited opportunities to seek help have led to poorer mental health outcomes among women and girls. The socio-economic impacts triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic clearly illustrate the connectedness of development concerns related to women. One broken link can threaten the whole chain of progress on women's issues.

To shift the dynamics by 2030 we need to move beyond counting, quantification, and assessment efforts. Now is no longer the time to ask whether there is a problem; now is the time for solutions. We need bold and courageous initiatives to inspire innovative actions to promote women's rights. The enormity of our challenge is to create a world in which women's equality is guaranteed, not granted.

The momentum created by the ICPD has deeply influenced development in my country, Bhutan. Our commitment to provide universal access to sexual and reproductive health services and advance the rights and choices for women and girls has brought about significant changes and visible impacts.

Today, our women and girls are healthier, better equipped to plan their families, and are living longer. Skilled birth attendance remains high and more than 90% of women opt to deliver in health facilities rather than their homes. We have achieved gender parity in primary and secondary education and female literacy has likewise improved. Perceptions about gender roles are rapidly changing. More women are actively involved in social and development programs and taking up leadership roles.

Our development philosophy of Gross National Happiness is at the center of all policies and programs. This index strives to include every woman, man and child in the development process where the happiness of the people should be the overarching measurement of a nation's progress; economic growth is just one of the means to that end.

It is the Visionary Leadership of His Majesty the King and the strength of Bhutan's commitment, in government and civil society alike, that has delivered such results for the people.

While considerable strides have been made we must admit that much more needs to be done. Access to quality health services that cater to women and girls sexual and reproductive concerns requires greater attention as it impacts every aspect of their lives. Women in rural areas in particular, face vulnerabilities and lack opportunities to access comprehensive health services.

The country is increasingly facing emerging challenges for our youth. Unmet need for modern contraception is high among adolescents. One-third of all HIV infections are reported among 15 to 24-year-olds and comprehensive knowledge on HIV/AIDS remains low in this age group.

Gender-based violence remains pervasive in my country, as it is across the globe. I believe this to be one of the biggest barriers to peaceful and sustainable development. No effort must be spared to eliminate this evil.

This year's theme, "Population, Food Security, Nutrition, and Sustainable Development" comes at a critical time.

On a global scale, the COVID-19 pandemic has had profound impacts on healthcare systems, food security, and gender equality. Without urgent action, hundreds of millions more will face poverty and hunger. Lack of access to nutritious food will have lifelong health and developmental consequences for children, pregnant and nursing mothers, from the most vulnerable and low income families.

Bhutan has not been completely immune to the pandemic's tragic effects. Despite, Bhutan's small population and developing economy, the lessons we have learned in mitigating the destructive consequences of the virus may have wide-reaching implications for countries that have been severely affected by the pandemic. By virtue of Dynamic and Compassionate Leadership, our small, land-locked country has managed to make it through the pandemic relatively unscathed so far.

Aggressive and early preparation, along with a well functioning health system, committed frontline workers and open, honest and transparent communication enabled the country to act swiftly and purposefully.

This pandemic has highlighted the vulnerabilities of women and children, and precautions such as quarantine and lockdowns came with significant economic costs. However, this challenging time has also taught us the significance of multi-sectoral responses, combined efforts of all stakeholders and the importance of placing people, especially vulnerable people, at the very centre of our responses.

Bhutan has successfully rolled out the first dose of the COVID-19 vaccinations to over 60% of her population with assistance from India. This gesture of goodwill from India is a shining example for the world to follow. It is imperative to ensure that vaccines are recognized as global public goods, and that they are made equitably and fairly accessible to all countries.

The pandemic is far from over but we remain confident and resolute in our approach to leave no one behind.

Every member state has a stake in the discussions that will take place today. I am very optimistic that decisions taken will provide us with additional insights and inspire innovative actions to accelerate progress towards the ICPD Program of action and SDGs.

As you engage in critical conversation over the next few days I encourage you to place the dignity of women and girls and compassion at the centre of all responses. Global solidarity and your leadership is needed more than ever as you come together to address humanity's greatest challenges.

I stand resolute and unwavering in my commitment to build a safer, happier and compassionate world for our women, girls, men and boys.

I wish the 54th Session of the Commission on Population and Development fruitful deliberations.

I thank you for your Attention!

Thank you & Tashi Delek