

**Opening Remarks by Dr. Natalia Kanem
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Fifty-fourth session of the Commission on Population and Development**

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Mr. Chairperson,
Deputy Secretary-General,
Your Majesty Queen Mother Gyalyum Sangay Choden Wangchuck of Bhutan
Excellencies,
Distinguished delegates,
Civil society friends,
Dear colleagues,

It is an honour to address this 54th session of the Commission on Population and Development.

Food is fundamental. The ICPD Programme of Action called for measures “to strengthen food, nutrition and agricultural policies and programmes...with special attention to the creation and strengthening of food security at all levels”.

In observing this year’s theme, we must remember that on every continent, whether in development or crisis settings, the prevalence of food insecurity is higher among women. Within households, it is often women and girls who eat last and least. When they are pregnant or breastfeeding, this spells disaster for mother and newborn.

Now, what was already bad has been made worse by COVID-19. The pandemic is causing a spike in poverty and, consequently, food insecurity and undernutrition, which in pregnancy increases the risk of low-birth-weight babies, obstructed labour, premature births, and maternal and newborn deaths.

Indeed, nutrition programmes count among the most cost-effective interventions for lifelong health. Delivery of such programmes must continue, pandemic or not, to ensure that women and children across the world survive and thrive.

The pandemic has been hard on everyone – older people, migrants, those living with disabilities, indigenous peoples and people of African descent.

Young people face disrupted education and obstacles to finding work.

Yet and still, COVID is a crisis with a woman's face, as we see an upsurge in gender-based violence, in child marriage, in adolescent pregnancy, and as barriers are thrown up to protective sexual and reproductive health services.

Food scarcity and movement restrictions place women and girls at higher risk of violence, transactional sex and other forms of sexual exploitation and abuse. We see this in the terrible bargain made when someone vulnerable exchanges unwanted sex for shelter or food, or when desperate families marry off their young daughters just to survive.

Of the many obstacles that still block women's path to equality, one of the most pervasive is the lack of bodily autonomy – the issue explored in UNFPA's just launched 2021 State of World Population Report. Titled "My body is my own: claiming the right to autonomy and self-determination", it shows that nearly half of women in countries where we have data lack the power to make their own decisions about whether to have sexual relations with their partner, use contraception or seek health care.

One year on, we see how the pandemic has exacerbated existing barriers that hinder women's ability to exercise these choices. Yet we know that when a woman is able to make her own decisions about her own body, she will thrive, and so too will her family.

Mr. Chairman, Distinguished Delegates,

The International Conference on Population and Development sat in Cairo 27 years ago and reached global consensus. Delegates from all regions recognized that health and well-being, including sexual and reproductive health and reproductive rights, gender equality, and education were at the very heart of development.

This vision was reiterated in multiple reviews, including the ICPD Beyond 2014 review, and this very Commission has linked the success of the implementation of the ICPD Programme of Action to the realization of the Sustainable Development Goals.

The Nairobi Summit on ICPD25 in 2019 reinvigorated the movement, mobilizing political will to accelerate the achievement of the Cairo agenda and the SDGs by 2030. I am encouraged that despite the challenges posed by COVID-19, we see progress in advancing the Nairobi commitments, proof that the world is serious about realizing this transformative agenda for women and girls.

Today, as we meet under the auspices of this landmark Commission, we must show the world that the nourishing of the aspirations of women, girls—indeed, everyone—will not escape our grasp. Let there be no obstacle to a resounding consensus that food security and nutrition underpin all the sustainable development goals and are essential to human dignity and well-being.

Let us seize this opportunity. Food is fundamental. Therefore, end hunger

In this Decade of Action, it is high time to regroup and re-commit to a world free from hunger, where people enjoy good health, and live without discrimination and fear.

I wish you fruitful deliberations and look forward to a successful outcome.

Thank you.