

Remarks delivered by Sarita Gupta at the High-Level Opening Session of the 57th session of the Commission on Population and Development

It is with great honor that I join you today. As we come together in this high-level session, we are prompted to reflect on the transformative journey that commenced nearly three decades ago in Cairo.

In 1994, over 4,000 individuals from diverse backgrounds convened for the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD). This pivotal moment marked a paradigm shift in global population policy, steering away from a narrow and harmful focus on population control towards a more inclusive framework centered on human rights, gender equality and bodily autonomy.

The Ford Foundation has been profoundly engaged in this transformative journey. Throughout much of the mid-twentieth century, our approach to population growth and fertility was centered in demographic concerns and family planning initiatives. However, as the world evolved, so too did our understanding of these critical issues.

We came to realize that genuine progress to match the bold vision of ICPD could only be achieved by centering the voice and leadership of women, young people, and gender-diverse individuals, promoting gender equality, and ensuring access to comprehensive health services for all, in particular sexual and reproductive health.

This paradigm shift propelled us to reimagine our grantmaking strategies. We transcended traditional family planning initiatives to embrace a broader vision of sexual and reproductive health, rights and justice that upholds bodily rights and this continues to be reflected in the Foundation's commitments to this day.

- In our gender, racial and ethnic justice program we drive efforts to expand the language and scope of gender equality frameworks and policies to acknowledge the entrenched structures of violence rooted in race, class, caste, religion, gender, and sexuality.
- We also firmly believe that the responsibility of dismantling structural barriers to gender equality, access to sexual and reproductive health and rights and violence prevention does not solely fall on the shoulders of women, girls and gender diverse individuals who are the most affected by discrimination. We act to fund collective efforts across sectors, movements, and regions, including acknowledging the links between gender justice, economic and climate justice.
- We are committed to supporting organizing to push forward against the roll back on abortion rights in this country, and those on the frontline pushing to uphold the fundamental right to decide when, how and whether to have children.
- Ford's centering gender initiative and funding is focused on fortifying organizations to mobilize for gender justice at the face of backlash.
- And finally, supporting the feminist movement infrastructure and women's rights groups to continue to engage in multilateral and intergovernmental spaces to uphold the commitments of Cairo, Beijing and the 2030 agenda. And in particular ensuring the transformative vision of these landmark agreements are interconnected and mutually reinforce each other.

Our investments were strategically directed toward supporting evidence-based advocacy, fortifying communication efforts, and empowering individuals to be in charge of their sexual and reproductive health and rights. The road to transformation was marked by collaboration, determination, and an unwavering commitment to change.

The outcomes of the ICPD, enshrined in the Programme of Action, stand as a testament to the collective efforts of all involved, in particular women's rights advocates and feminists from the global majority.

This collective intergenerational call for action is also reflected on the commitment and actions of the 2030 Agenda and its related sustainable development goals.

It is because of the strong foundation laid in Cairo in 1994 that we were able to hone in the necessity of having SDGs focused on health, education and gender equality. Moreover, the recognition and call to action that we cannot achieve sustainable development eradicate poverty, violence, and discrimination without realizing sexual and reproductive health and rights and gender equality.

As we convene here today, three decades later, it is imperative that we reflect on the distance we have traversed and the path that lies ahead. While significant strides have been made, we continue to grapple with formidable challenges, from persistent gender disparities and gender-based violence - - to the ongoing struggle for reproductive justice and bodily autonomy globally.

The ambition envisioned in Cairo for bodily autonomy, dignity and right is far from being realized and our assignment is clear: we must be bold in action and political will if we are to deliver on the promises of 30 years ago.

To effect change is a noble aspiration, yet it remains an arduous endeavor, fraught with challenges and setbacks. However, to gauge change solely through metrics seems to overlook its inherent essence—the deeply felt impetus to act. Let us draw inspiration from the spirit of collaboration and determination that have propelled us through the past three decades, guiding us to this pivotal moment.

