

**Opening Remarks by Dr. Natalia Kanem
Executive Director of the United Nations Population Fund,
at the 57th session of the Commission on Population and Development
Monday, 29 April 2024 | 10:00 am
General Assembly Hall, New York**

Madam Chair,
Deputy Secretary-General,
Excellencies,
Distinguished delegates,
Dear colleagues, dear young people, dear friends,

This session of the Commission is an opportunity to take stock of our collective progress since 1994, and there is much to celebrate.

Thirty years ago, at the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) in Cairo, world leaders joined together to affirm that gender equality, the empowerment of women and girls, and universal access to sexual and reproductive health are human rights, preconditions for sustainable development.

Since the Cairo conference, the principles of its groundbreaking Programme of Action have united us in our journey to create a better world for all, by wisely placing women and girls at the center of development.

For instance:

- Girls have reached parity with boys in primary school enrolment, and now exceed boys in post-secondary enrolment.
- Average life expectancy increased from 65 years in 1994 to more than 73 years today. We now live in a period of healthy longevity!
- Between 2000 and 2020, maternal mortality declined by fully one-third.
- Family planning is accessible to millions more women and couples; more pregnancies are planned and wanted than ever before.
- More good news. Women made steady progress in government representation. Not a single parliament or congress today is male-only.

These facts and figures tell an inspiring story. What truly motivates me – and I was present in Egypt for the historic ICPD as a young foundation official – is seeing the difference our collective investments and resolve are making in making life better for the millions of women and girls UNFPA serves on the ground in some 130 countries.

I've talked to girls like Tocosana from Mozambique. She was able to escape early marriage and early childbearing – and now mentors other girls in her community. Her dream? To become a doctor.

There's Ngoma, who comes from the Democratic Republic of Congo. She rallies her community to raise awareness about sexual and gender-based violence, particularly the risks for people with disabilities, like herself.

Magali in Bolivia started up an award-winning project. It's called SELF-DISCOVER(ED), and it provides comprehensive sexuality education to indigenous and first-generation students to combat high teen pregnancy rates and help end sexual abuse. Magali wants to ensure that her generation understand their rights and have the tools and opportunities to make informed decisions.

All this and more was the promise of the Cairo ICPD. It's evergreen! It's a promise playing out in the lives of millions of girls today with ripple effects across society.

These are gains we went to battle for and achieved together – government leaders, civil society, community volunteers, the private sector, the United Nations, local governments and communities the world over – following that exemplary multilateral agreement 30 years ago.

Yet there is still unfinished business. We still have much work ahead to make the vision of the Cairo ICPD real for women, girls, and young people everywhere – in all their diversities.

Worrisomely, annual reductions in maternal deaths have flatlined since 2016. Covid only made things worse as health systems faltered. In some countries, maternal death rates have increased.

Unfinished business: The disparity between women's and men's formal employment is the same today as it was back in 1994 – meaning that millions of women today lack the economic power to invest in themselves and their families.

And it is unacceptable and unconscionable that we are not making anywhere near the progress needed to put an end to gender-based violence and femicide, once and for all.

Just a few examples of the unfinished business that remains. We cannot sit still, and that's why UNFPA is redoubling our efforts to accelerate progress on sexual and reproductive health and rights.

Earlier this month, with the Governments of Benin, Denmark and the Netherlands, UNFPA brought together over 500 young leaders from 130 countries in Cotonou for the Global Youth Dialogue on ICPD30.

There, young people defined their vision for the next phase of the ICPD Programme of Action. They are calling for urgent action to realize their right to bodily autonomy, to education, to decent work, and to live in peaceful societies. They want more clout in decision-making and a greater voice in critical global conversations.

UNFPA stands ready to work with governments to strengthen mechanisms for youth engagement. The world needs their leadership to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals and to chart the path ahead beyond 2030.

Covid, conflict, and economic turbulence have set us back, and emerging challenges loom: climate crisis, alarming backlash against women's rights, and new technologies that need to be employed and regulated judiciously to advance human progress without creating harm.

UNFPA's just released 2024 State of World Population report reminds us that commitments made at the ICPD rallied global support for sexual and reproductive health, momentum we still build upon today. Investments in sexual and reproductive health and rights increased fivefold after countries agreed at the turn of the millennium, "to build a world with no one left behind."

Although the new report shows that we have not prioritized reaching those furthest behind, it also reveals that policymakers do agree overwhelmingly on the need to address inequalities in sexual and reproductive health and rights.

We know that it's investment, collective action, and political will that make the difference.

A 2020 analysis by UNFPA and academic partners found that it would only take \$222 billion in new investment to secure an end to preventable maternal deaths, eliminate unmet need for family planning, and safeguard women and girls everywhere from gender-based violence and harmful practices by 2030. Thereby transforming the lives of millions.

Girls who are not married off as children have a greater chance of finishing school and securing employment. That would translate into trillions of dollars in economic benefits for society. Increasing women's participation in the workplace could boost per capita GDP by nearly 20 per cent on average.

When we invest in women and girls, everyone gains.

Excellencies, distinguished delegates

The ICPD Programme of Action is not just an acronym, only to be understood within the august halls of the United Nations. Much more than this, it represents a continual clarion call for a more just, prosperous, peaceful and sustainable world – a vision still highly relevant to all of our lives, and a promise to nurture and protect every 10-year-old girl on the verge of adolescence.

I urge you to keep her in mind during your deliberations this week. I hope she, and every woman and young person still waiting for that promise to be made real in their lives, will inspire you to action. While, at the request of the Secretary-General, I will have to travel to Chile to participate in the Chief Executives Board meeting this week, my UNFPA colleagues and I will remain available for constructive engagement with you to continue to advance the ICPD agenda.

Thirty years after Cairo, why must women wait a day longer to control their own fertility? To not die during pregnancy and childbirth? To escape gender-based violence and online harm? Why must young people continue to wait – until it's too late – to understand their own biology and safeguard their reproductive health?

The high level of representation here at CPD57 is most encouraging. I commend Member States for their agreement on the political declaration to be adopted, which reaffirms the importance of the ICPD Programme of Action. I do hope that your discussions this week spark commitment to urgent, accelerated action as we head towards the Summit of the Future and ready ourselves and our partners for the opportunities and challenges ahead.

We know what success can be accomplished when we work together. Let us keep moving forward, faster, and this time, let's bring everyone along with us. Women and girls are requesting action. They are counting on us, and they cannot afford to wait yet another 30 years. Forward in partnership, together!