

**Oral statement by the International Planned Parenthood Federation (IPPF) at the  
45<sup>th</sup> Session of the Commission on Population and Development**

The International Planned Parenthood Federation (IPPF) works in 173 countries through 153 Member Associations to advocate for the sexual and reproductive rights of all young people and is the largest provider of sexual and reproductive health services to young people in the world. As a Federation of grassroots organisations, we are committed to implementing the Programme of Action (PoA) of the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD), which recognizes the sexual and reproductive health needs and, importantly, the *rights* of adolescents and youth.

We, as an international community, have taken great strides towards fulfilling the rights of young people across the world since ICPD in terms of our partnerships, financial investment and understanding of young people's rights, health and needs. Yet, despite the commitments made almost two decades ago, 13 million adolescent girls give birth each year in developing countries – most often before they are physically, financially or emotionally prepared. Complications from pregnancy and childbirth remain the leading cause of death amongst young women aged 15 to 19 in developing countries and half of all new HIV infections are amongst young people – an estimated 4,000 to 5,000 every day. An estimated 215 million women still do not have access to modern methods of contraception, despite their desire to delay or space the birth of their children. Worldwide, young people face legal, social and cultural barriers as well as stigma in accessing sexual and reproductive health services and information across the globe. This has to change.

Young people are rights-holders and they need to be recognized as such. It is high time that we equip them with the information, education and services they need to make informed decisions about their sexual lives, health and well-being. We must facilitate their access to the services they need to turn those informed decisions into reality for their lives without feeling ashamed, embarrassed or fearful.

There are still too many young people for whom the only available sources of information about sex, sexuality, gender, rights, diversity, health and pleasure are at best unreliable and – at worst – promote myths, misconceptions and lies. Such false information only serves to stigmatize young people's sexuality and promote harmful traditional practices or beliefs that further entrench gender inequality. All of this prevents them from realizing their right to the highest attainable standard of sexual and reproductive health.

IPPF believes that primary and secondary schools provide a crucial opportunity for reaching young people with accurate information and life skills relating to sex, health and relationships whilst challenging harmful traditional, gender and other norms that perpetuate sexual and reproductive ill-health. Despite this, scientifically-unfounded objections supposing that the provision of such information will encourage sexual activity dominate discourse in many regions. We must put an end to ideologically-driven policies that deny young people the opportunity to obtain the skills and information that they have by right. We also must look beyond schools to those young people who are not within the formal education systems.

In addition to a lack of information, young people face specific legal barriers to accessing actual sexual and reproductive health services. The pace at which capacity is attained differs for each individual and is dependent on life circumstances. IPPF contends that age should not be used as the sole indicator of a young person's capacity to make autonomous decisions. Despite this, it is often utilised as a determinant of capacity both in law and in the personal estimation of health professionals, which can lead to the perpetuation of judgmental attitudes and the denial of services.

IPPF recognizes the positive and supportive roles that parents, health professionals and educators can play in young people's lives. However, laws that require parental consent for accessing services and information presume that they are incapable of making decisions for their own lives. Such laws persist, despite the PoA's call for States to remove legal barriers that prevent young people from accessing SRH information and services (PoA Para 7.45).

All young people should be able to access services in a setting that promotes their right to privacy and where they can feel safe and comfortable. This could never be truer than in relation to the provision of abortion services for young women. Every year, young women between the ages of 15 and 19 undergo an estimated 2.5 million unsafe abortions. These are unsafe and often clandestine services that put these women's lives, health and futures at risk. Worldwide, young women under the age of 20 make up 70 per cent of the hospitalizations for abortion-related complications. These statistics show that there is an age-related disadvantage that young women face, in addition to other barriers they face, in accessing safe abortion services, and it must be brought to an end.

In all of these discussions, we must not forget that there is great and wonderful diversity amongst young people. We must ensure that such diversity is not suppressed by a desire to maintain a status quo that disadvantages whole swathes of the population. More than merely tolerating the diversity that exists, we must embrace it; we must celebrate it. In doing so, we must recognize that those groups that remain stigmatized or marginalized deserve, but do not often have a voice where it matters most. IPPF recognizes that young sex workers, LGBTI, young people living with HIV, young people without access to IT and rural young people are amongst those groups rarely named or invited to discussions about their needs and rights. It is not a luxury to involve these groups; it is a human rights imperative.

Since 1994, this international community has been guided by a Programme of Action. Again, IPPF commends the achievements, commitment and investment of the international community, but we also recognize that much remains off-track. Without a shared sense of urgency and a common belief that young people's sexual and reproductive health deserves more time, attention and – importantly – investment, the perpetuation of this vicious cycle will continue. We invite you, as our partners and governments, to share our vision for a world where the ICPD goals have been achieved and to work with us to turn that vision into a reality. Thank you.