

Ashley Judd remarks made at the opening of the Commission on Population and Development

1 April 2019

Thank you, Mr. Chairperson

President of the Economic and Social Council, Ms. Inga Rhonda King,
Executive Director UNFPA, Dr. Natalia Kanem,
Assistant Secretary General, Ms. Maria-Francesca Spatolisano,
Excellencies,
Distinguished delegates,
Ladies and gentlemen,

I am here today as a messenger for the 600 million adolescent girls around the world, the 6.7 million girls who will be forced into marriage this year, the 214 million women who are unable to access family planning, the 300,000 women who will die preventable deaths whilst giving life this year.

I am honored to be a goodwill ambassador for UNFPA, the UN Population Fund. I am also here as a member of a global movement of women, of people, working to craft a world for which the blueprint was made 25 years ago, for which progress has been painfully and unacceptably slow. For which the past few years have been a political battleground, where the needs of real people have been forgotten as political arguments have spiralled away from the people they are meant to serve, and been allowed to end in deadlock.

In 1994, your predecessors from 179 Governments met in Cairo at the International Conference on Population and Development, and together with partners from civil society designed the ICPD Programme of Action. This was a paradigm shift for population and development, as the world finally realized that people's rights, autonomous choices, and individual well-being are the path to sustainable development.

And it was more than that. This was a revolution that placed the future of the world's development firmly in the hands of its women and girls, who demanded the right to make decisions over their own bodies and their lives, to have bodily integrity and sexual autonomy.

Twenty-five years of evidence and practice continue to support this consensus, and prove that this mission is as vital, as critical today as it was back then.

These are principles at play that I have been able to witness firsthand during my 17 years in the field of women's and girls' reproductive rights, and on my missions with UNFPA to see its life-saving and life-changing work in Jordan, Turkey, Ukraine, India, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Kenya, Democratic Republic of Congo, and South Sudan.

Distinguished delegates, in my words, I am trying to convey the passionate stories and interactions I have had with girls and woman all over the world. I bring to you the love of Tatiana in eastern Ukraine, who through UNFPA's psychosocial support connected to her innate courage and was given the practical tools she needed to leave a husband who thought it was okay to beat her and hit their three children. Tatiana fed me with her own hands into my mouth vegetables she raised, and I played in the shimmering creek with children on an idyllic summer day. I bring the sweetness of my adopted Syrian family who in the Zaatari refugee camp in Jordan, took me into their tent, made sure I was comfortable on the ground, while the 15 year old who was already expecting her second baby, painted my hands and feet with henna while we rested from the chaos and bustle just outside their plastic walls. I bring you the laughter and mirth of more Syrian refugees in Turkey with whom I did AcroYoga! And the energy and cleverness of youth in Sri Lanka who create plays about abusive masculinity and how to disrupt rape culture and create safety and freedom for our streets and on public transportation.

We must hear then, see how their story stands for the stories of hundreds of millions more women and girls like them from your country and from around the world. And please think about the promises that we made to them 25 years ago.

My message to you is simple It is neither controversial nor political.

It is this: women and girls count;

We matter.

Our rights are inherent to us

Are owed to us.

And if we invest in girls and women

the world and all of the 17 sustainable development goals will advance forward rapidly as a result.

A quarter of a century ago, we brought on the revolution! This was a revolution that changed the way we think about the fundamental force that is at the heart of all human development: reproduction.

The vision of the ICPD is of a world where all citizens are free and equal in dignity and rights, where gender and sex equality, sexual and reproductive health and reproductive rights are recognized for what they are: A central pillar of an improving society.

And yet there are profound, practical barriers that women and girls around the world face in manifesting their sexual autonomy, bodily integrity, and their ability to take decisions that are empowering and good for them and their families.

We are facing a backlash to so much of what the ICPD stands for -- to women's rights, to the rights of marginalized groups around the world like the young, the old, people living with disabilities, rural populations, LGBTI people, migrants and people affected by conflict or natural disasters. And when these factors intersect, life is even more dangerous for girls and women.

This is a backlash against the vision of inclusive societies that we agreed on a quarter of a century ago. Despite being the building blocks of sustainable development that will benefit us all, these principles are under threat and being eroded around the world.

I feel urgently this mission. I carry inside of me the visceral reality of the vulnerable, exploited, traumatized girls and women with whom I have cooked, danced, cried and laughed, jumped rope and played games, and shared from the soul. Their ability to be safe and secure in the most basic ways are unsafe and insecure.

The discussions you have, at this Commission, reach into countries, communities and families across the world. They reach into bedrooms and bathrooms of the most vulnerable people and they can save lives.

But only if you want them to.

DEMOGRAPHICS

The world's population is more varied now than it has ever been before. As we heard this morning, some countries are growing rapidly due to high fertility, while others are even shrinking as they face a combination of low fertility, ageing and outflows of young people migrating in search of opportunity. Some countries are stretching to keep up with large numbers of youth, while others are building systems to support older persons and trying to help people start families.

But as the Secretary-General's report states, these complex population dynamics must not be regarded as faceless numerical abstractions. Rather, they are foundational

descriptions of the real-life human experiences of all people and evidence of the existence - or deprivation - of their fundamental human rights.

The statistics and trends of the world's 7.7 billion people come to life when we can understand that this number is really a tapestry woven from the stories of billions of people who depend on their individual rights to determine if, when and how many children they have:

- The stories of women in West Africa and teenage moms in South America who are unable to access contraception and are having more children than they want to.
- Or of couples in Eastern Europe or East Asia, who are facing economic, social, professional or even personal health constraints that are stopping them from starting families or having as many children they would like.
- Or of girls in fragile settings who are forced into child marriage by parents who feel they have no better option to guarantee their safety.

When people are denied their right to choose if and when to have children, it can make fertility rates higher or lower than they desire. And this can have huge implications for the future well-being of individuals, families and societies. Like the hundreds and hundreds of women I see in Congo who have one pregnancy after another, the young girls with whom I bathe in the river who are already post partum.

Family size and reproductive rights go hand in hand, and they, in turn, are tied to many other rights, including the right to and need for adequate health, education, and jobs. Where people can exercise their rights, they tend to thrive. Where these rights are stifled, people struggle for adequate nutrition, and have tremendous daily struggles to survive, much less to achieve their full potential. Poverty alleviation and social progress is impeded. And whole countries lose out as a result. The matters under discussion here are so fundamental that they underpin all elements of a country's society and economy.

Each of the world's 7.7 billion people has a story and a life that your decisions here will influence.

PROGRESS AND GAPS ACROSS KEY THEMATIC AREAS

The story of the ICPD on its 25th birthday is not a story of doom and gloom.

And it is also not a story of outright success.

Progress since 1994 is evident across many indicators of women's and girls' empowerment. Boys and girls are enrolling in primary schools at equal rates, although girls still experience challenges with menstruation hygiene, or sexual coercion

We have seen a 40 percent decline in maternal mortality, and more women and girls are able to access family planning than before, such as in DRC where UNFPA was instrumental in changing the laws that allow a married women to access family planning, and adolescent girls, too.

We're making progress on fighting workplace inequalities and we are seeing greater recognition of the scale and impact of gender-based violence than before. We are also seeing a rising number of women as political leaders.

We shouldn't be patting ourselves on the back just yet, because one girl told she must give sex in exchange for grade is one girl too many.

In 2000, when we agreed to the Millennium Development Goals, we all committed to reducing by 75% the numbers of women who die while giving birth. Five years after the deadline we set, we have achieved little more than half of that. We committed to achieving universal access to reproductive health by 2015, but we still have over 200 million women who cannot access family planning. And OK, people are talking more about sex and gender-based violence than before, in part because we are finally publicly recognizing that it is pervasive across all societies.

Women still live with beatings, sometimes from men, sometimes from female relatives in patriarchal family systems.

And today, thousands of girls who will be forced into marriage today. Girls should be students, not wives.

And 200 million women alive today living with the physical agony and emotional trauma of female genital mutilation.

And 60,000 women in South Sudan alone are estimated living obstetric fistula. I was able to attend second ever fistula repair surgery in South Sudan. A young woman, leaking feces and urine, was benefiting from a partnership between UNFPA and UN

Peacekeepers that brought surgeons from Uganda and South Africa to rural South Sudan to change women's lives.

The list of outrageous, painful abuses relating to our sexual and reproductive health is lengthy and varied. Each relates to a lack of bodily autonomy. And our response should be righteous anger and deep motivation.

But this is not just a problem that poorer countries are facing. Everyone knows I am open about being a survivor of sexual abuse and rape. I was molested for the first time when I was only seven years old, and the adult I told protected the adult man, saying, "Oh he's a nice old man, that's not what he meant." Rapists in America have paternity rights in 22 states. We have a lot of work to do right here in my country, and certainly organizations like INSERTS DETAILS OF AMERICAN ORGANIZATIONS SHE WORKS WITH.

CHALLENGES

Our work is cut out for us all. No-one here can feel their government's job is done, and it's very clear that we know what we have to do. So what is holding us back?

Firstly, the world is in a difficult place right now. There are more people living in humanitarian conditions than ever before, including 32 million women and girls of reproductive age. The number of displaced persons has increased dramatically in recent years, reaching an estimated 68.5 million in 2018, far exceeding the 47 million displaced in 1994, and representing the largest number since WWII.

From Ukraine to Syria, to Myanmar and South Sudan, I have seen firsthand the challenges that the ravages of war can have upon individuals and families, and how women and girls suffer disproportionately compared to men and boys. From being able to avoid being married off to adult men, to regulate their fertility with modern family planning choices that are right for them, to antenatal care for their precious new births and skilled midwives to attend to safe birth in fragile settings, to their right to simply go about their lives without the ever-present risk of being raped, molested, harassed, or abused, while fetching water or gathering firewood or getting on a bus, the women I have met need health care services, sanitary supplies, safe spaces, psychosocial support and quality, compassionate care when they have faced the unthinkable at the hands of men.

In addition to the world being in a precarious geo-political state right now, there are three factors for success that are well within the reach of the governments represented here today, which I hope you can commit to as part of your 25th birthday present to the ICPD:

1. Firstly - money! With more resources from your governments devoted to women and girls, we can accelerate our progress. And we know how much we need. For example, the world is facing a crisis in funding for international family planning programmes, which are essential to supporting the rights and health of women everywhere. To sustain its work and continue serving growing target populations, UNFPA's family planning programme - called UNFPA Supplies - needs an additional \$700 million for 2018-2021. Fully funded, the Programme could avert 116 million unintended pregnancies, and provide savings in the cost of health care for families and nations of \$5.5 billion.

And for those who think that family planning is an expense, you should consider it an investment! UNFPA and their partners have crunched the numbers, and seen that for every additional dollar that is invested in contraception, the cost of pregnancy-related care will be reduced by \$2.20. In terms of socioeconomic benefits, achieving universal access to quality sexual and reproductive health services is estimated to yield returns of \$120 for every dollar invested.

Family planning can also help countries realize a 'demographic dividend', a major boost in economic productivity that occurs when there are growing numbers of people in the workforce and falling numbers of dependents they have to look after.

So my message number 1 is simple: Invest your money in women's and girls' rights!

2. Secondly - we need clear thinking and political will! As soon as women's bodies become an ideological battleground, women stand to suffer and we all lose. In far too many places right now, the political symbolism of the issues at stake, rather than the concrete reality of the lives they will be affecting, is trumping the rights of women and girls to simple things - like contraception - that they are entitled to by law.

And it pains me to see that here at the UN, these divisions seem to have encroached in recent years and prevented the UN Commission on Population and Development from finding consensus for three of the last four years.

The human rights that we are celebrating have been agreed upon for decades. And as I said in my introduction, we have twenty-five years of evidence and practice that continue to support this consensus. They are not political bargaining chips. In fact, they should not be political at all.

3. Thirdly: we need the data! It's difficult to organize your house if you don't turn the lights on. We have seen this as waves of new data on gender-based violence force people to recognize this issue. As fertility rates, age structures and other demographic trends vary drastically both within and between countries, lawmakers need to shine light upon the people they are serving to know as much about them as possible, particularly those left furthest behind. The capacity to monitor and project population dynamics must be a core investment for governments, so they can plan the response of their public services accordingly. How can you know how many schools to build if you don't know how many children you have; and how can you plan your health services if you don't know the age of your population?

If you want your people know that they count, you need to count them!

UNIVERSALITY OF ISSUES / CONCLUSION

Dear friends, the ICPD is a universal agenda. It is relevant in the world's richest and poorest countries, and in the world's stablest or most fragile places. Women and girls have universal rights and needs, and it is our moral obligation to uphold and champion them.

No country on earth has achieved gender equality, and yet we have all committed to it. So why are we standing idly by and letting this resistance sidetrack us, stall us and push us back?

25 years ago, the global revolution in reproductive health and rights culminated in the ICPD Programme of Action. In 1994, we put people first in the quest for better health and development. Millions more people can now aspire to a better life by making

informed, safe choices about reproductive health. Women like INSERTS PERSONAL ANECDOTE

But the revolution is incomplete, and until we are finished it is the most marginalized people who will suffer first, and suffer worst. Women like Ajida, who represents many like her.

We face so many challenges, captured in the breadth of the 17 sustainable development goals and their 169 targets. Amidst an ever growing sustainable development agenda, we need to remember, recapture, reaffirm the goals, objectives and values inherent in the ICPD Programme of Action. That we are all better off when every person is healthy, empowered, and counted.

Around the world, these values are motivating action by governments, civil society, social movements, community leaders. Making sure that ICPD -- that its vision of the world, the vision your governments generated and committed to, 25 years ago, is a fundamental, central part of what we all aspire to achieve.

Friends, now is the moment: rights and choices for everyone. No exceptions.

I implore you to reaffirm the ICPD today, and to join UNFPA and the movements that support women's and girls' rights on our march to the Nairobi Summit on ICPD25 from 12th to 14th November 2019. Together with the governments of Kenya and Denmark and the rest of the world, we will gather world leaders to plan our collective way forward, to finish the unfinished business of the ICPD Programme of Action, and to achieve sustainable development by realizing the rights and choices of all.

We will mobilize a global, diverse group of allies, representing every country and constituency. We will insist on every action required to advance rights and choices, and realize the world we want and that every vulnerable person deserves.