

High-Level Task Force for the ICPD

Celebrating Cairo & Going Beyond

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Speech by Ishita Chaudhry

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In 2002, my country witnessed terrible communal riots in Gujarat, a state in the western region. I was 17 and had just returned from working in a small village there. I will never forget the images I saw in the media, of people being burnt alive. I have never been able to establish contact with the girls I worked, lived and played with; I have no idea if they survived. It was even more painful to comprehend why government leaders were more interested in discussing reviving Gujarat's industry instead of ensuring justice for atrocious human rights violations. That is where my activism and journey with The YP Foundation began.

12 years later and 350,000 young people stronger, I continue to see the fundamentalist outcries, religious intolerance, riots and gender-based violence that sadly, still exist. I have learned over the last few years that at the United Nations, the lives and health of women and girls, our agency and our human rights, are easily traded. And when I ask government representatives why they think it is acceptable to trade on women's human rights in the name of economic growth, or the right to development, or any other "more important issue" I am told that there are more priorities to consider, and that I am too young to understand. I will **never** understand how it is acceptable to trade off on the health and human rights of half the world's population.

In my line of work, I am lucky to meet exceptional everyday heroes. Rani* is one of them, a peer-educator in our sexuality education programme for out-of-school girls. Rani, who was 16, was to be married to a middle aged man. But she was able to learn about her bodily autonomy and human rights, and to be heard and respected by her family in saying no. We did not do this; she was able to access the skills, tools and knowledge to do this for herself. Two years later, the same girl who once had to wait to eat until after the men in her home had finished their meals and had no autonomy to take decisions, traveled alone outside her state to address central Government officials in Delhi on how health policies could reach out-of-school girls like herself, more effectively.

There is such deep irony, in us being uncomfortable with girls getting married at the age of 9 and having children at the age of 12, but blocking their access to comprehensive sexuality education. We believe in delaying the age of marriage, and working with young mothers, but don't believe in empowering a girl to not be in that situation in the first place and in giving her the agency of choice. In reducing rates of

HIV infection and STIs but not in giving access to comprehensive package of acceptable, affordable and available services that are of quality.

Many say that sexual and reproductive rights are *western values*. Perhaps they need to speak to girls like Rani who come from Dalit communities in India, who will tell you that wanting to be economically independent, choosing her own future and having control over her own body, is what she needs and what *she* values. To make her own life choices. She doesn't agree with governments who say that her human rights aren't *culturally appropriate*; she would like to decide that for herself.

I grew up in a country ranked 4th in unsafe places to live in the world. Delhi, my city, is particularly well known globally for its violence against women. I took the decision two years ago to move out of my parent's home and was told by others, that by doing so, to be careful, because I *was asking for it*. I was asking to be raped, to experience violence, because I was choosing to be independent. I realized that apart from my own fears of not knowing how to change the gas cylinder in my kitchen that we are taught culturally as young women, to always live in fear. But many young people are challenging such social and cultural norms and the Internet has given us a new language to be able to do so. I am proud to be able to share with you, '*It's My Fault*', a satirical video produced by young people in India with virtually no budget. It went viral on its release and has since been seen by 3.5 million people globally, asking us to examine norms that perpetuate violence against women and look at the role each of us plays in the same.

On the 20th anniversary of one of the most powerful international commitments our world has, the Cairo Programme of Action, young women and men, **today**, we need all of your leadership and courage, to make sure that the international community, and all governments, re-commit to ensuring our sexual and reproductive rights and address the unjust social, economic and environmental conditions that perpetuate poverty, violence and discrimination. You can commit to making sure that your government empowers women and girls to realize their human rights and live a prosperous and peaceful life.

You cannot be afraid of challenging injustice. My generation looks to you for how you will choose to leave your footprints at this moment in history. We hope you will be wildly, deeply inspirational in ensuring that the commitment to achieving Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights remains at the core of the international development agenda. And that you will have the courage if needed, to be unpopular and stand your ground. We know that this is not easy, but the lives of millions of young women and girls, including mine, depend on it. We will remember your footprints, and 20 years from today we hope to be able to look back to this CPD, and celebrate your courage.

*name changed