

High-Level Task Force for the ICPD

Celebrating Cairo & Going Beyond

Side event 47th session of the Commission on Population and Development

**Keynote speech by: Ms. Navi Pillay
United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights
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Excellencies, Ladies and gentlemen,

I am delighted to be among you to mark the twentieth anniversary of the ICPD. At OHCHR, the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, as you may know, we celebrated our twentieth anniversary last year. Next year we will gather to mark 20 years of the Beijing Platform for Action. Human rights; population and development; and women's rights: these three agendas, laid out in three succeeding years, complement and support each other. They are resilient and powerful.

Their common touchstone is the fundamental dignity and autonomy of every human being. In the resonant words of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. All human beings have the right to make choices and to pursue their aspirations in an enabling environment, free from want and free from fear.

We have a duty to work together in order to promote that enabling environment and end discrimination. One vital focus within that task is women's rights, because discrimination based on gender is so deeply entrenched in virtually every community on Earth. It is almost invisible; we rarely think of it. Yet half the population of almost every society is being held back to some degree from full development and free choice regarding their ambitions, talents and skills. This discrimination brings with it a huge economic cost. It is also a profound, and unacceptable, injustice.

As we mark this auspicious anniversary, two decades since Cairo, we naturally look ahead to the next 20 years. I propose we take a moment to envision what it would look like if all human beings, including women, were allowed to enjoy all their human rights. All girls would grow up with adequate medical care, adequate nutrition and shelter. No girl would receive less care than her brothers, because no girl would be valued less by her community. All girls would have easy and equal access to education, giving them every opportunity to develop and pursue their skills with no thought of harmful traditional stereotypes about a woman's role.

They would not live in constant threat of physical violence, either within or outside their homes. Their sanitation needs would be respected in conditions of dignity and safety; no girl would be forced to stay home because of the “shame” of menstruation. They would be able to choose their work, and to decide freely whether and whom to marry, or to divorce.

All women would have access to affordable, safe health services of acceptable quality. Every pregnancy would be a wanted one, because all individuals would have the right to choose when and whether to have children. And if they were to bring a child into the world, that would be a safe experience; not one that leads to the death of a mother, as so often happens now.

In this future world, there would be no child marriage. No so-called ‘honour’ killings. No-one would be killed, beaten, raped, denied services or told they are less than worthy simply because of who they love. There would be no victims of human trafficking of any kind. No domestic slavery or bonded labour. No rape within or outside marriage. No involuntary sterilisation. Every woman and girl would participate openly and fully in the decisions framing the political, economic and cultural life of her community and country – just as every man and boy would.

Ladies and gentlemen, how can we work towards this vision of equality?

We know what equality should look like. International standards list the necessary measures, which States have ratified and agreed to enact. But we need to ingrain a culture of human rights into the hearts and minds of many leaders. We need to overcome resistance to sexual and reproductive rights which are such a key part of human rights law and of the ICPD’s programme of action.

Sexual and reproductive rights are human rights. They are not new rights, and they are not optional. They are intrinsic to a range of internationally binding treaties. At the very core of these rights is the autonomy of every human being, which involves deeply personal issues such as whether, when, how and with whom any individual chooses to have sex; whether, when, and whom one chooses to marry; whether, when, how and with whom one chooses to have children; and how we choose to express gender and sexuality.

To guarantee these rights for all people, we must dismantle harmful gender stereotypes. These notions of what it means to be a woman or a man and our respective roles in society are ingrained in every culture, and have immense impact on the enjoyment of human rights.

These beliefs vary from place to place, but they have some commonalities. They honour women's reproductive capacity and role as mothers but stigmatize the physical functions which make that reproduction possible and the free sexual desire that it expresses. They legitimize rampant gender-based violence, based on stereotypes of women as passive in matters of sexuality and men as sexually aggressive. Stereotypes of women as irrational underlie the denial of their rights to make critical decisions about their lives and bodies. Gender-based stereotypes also fuel hate against lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people.

Human rights law obliges States to address these harmful notions. Until we do this, equality of all human beings is impossible.

The work we have to do is admittedly long. One important first, and immediate, step that we can take is to support and defend all women human rights defenders. They face immense risks, particularly when their work focuses on gender, sexuality and sexual and reproductive rights. But their work builds, brick by brick, the bridge that every society can cross in order to achieve equality, and break down harmful stereotypes. We can help them build that bridge.

In fact, not only can we do this – we must. My warmest wishes go with you as you continue this work.

Thank you.