

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

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.

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 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

