



## **Commonwealth Women's Affairs Ministers Meeting**

### **"From Commitment to Action: Accelerating Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment for Sustainable Development"**

**Remarks by**

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**The United Nations Population Fund**

**(10 min.)**

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*Nairobi, Kenya*

Excellency Uhuru Kenyatta, President of Kenya

Right Honourable Patricia Scotland, Commonwealth Secretary-General

Honourable Cabinet Secretary, Professor Margaret Kobias

Excellencies, Honourable Ministers, Distinguished Delegates,

Partners and Friends,

*Jambo!*

I greet you in peace, the noble mission of the United Nations, and I come in solidarity with the highest ideals of the Commonwealth of Nations.

We share with the Commonwealth, among many core values, a belief in individual freedom, human rights, and prosperity through sustainable development.

We at UNFPA are proud to stand shoulder to shoulder with you as a major force for change in gender equality and women's empowerment, issues that lie at the heart of the Sustainable Development Goals and our joint commitment to leave no one behind.

On behalf of UNFPA, the United Nations sexual and reproductive health agency, I thank the Government of Kenya for hosting this important meeting and for being a champion of gender equality and women's empowerment. We are grateful to have such a steadfast partner.

I especially thank H.E. President Kenyatta for his firm commitment to ending practices that harm women and girls and hinder their potential, including female genital mutilation.

President Kenyatta, we at UNFPA will work with you, your government and the people of Kenya to achieve this goal.

As I speak, somewhere along the coast of this beautiful Continent, but it could be anywhere really since it will happen 33,000 times today, a girl is being prepared with a special outfit and simple jewelry. Her family has high expectations for her as they are handing her over in marriage to a man many years her senior. But what awaits this innocent girl child is hardly a fairy tale of happily ever after. Her education, truncated. Her chance to experience happy healthy well-spaced childbirths in the intimacy of an adult relationship, dashed. Her prospects to fulfil her potential and contribute to the economy of her community, shrunken. Her spirit, broken.

Distinguished guests,

This is a watershed moment for our world. It is time to guarantee the rights of everyone, especially women and girls, and to address the imbalance in power relations in families and in communities.

This is a fight we must wage and win – together.

At country level, it will take an all-government approach and integrated national financing strategies for gender and sexual and reproductive health issues across all sectors. It entails respectful outreach to religious and traditional leaders, to women’s groups, girls and boys clubs, and to our parliamentarians who want the best for women and girls in their constituencies. And it will take the integrated, interdisciplinary approach of One-UN. We at UNFPA and all our UN partners are committed, through the Secretary-General’s current UN reform efforts, to delivering better together to support and work with countries to achieve transformative results.

The leadership and strength of the Commonwealth is needed now more than ever as we seek to consolidate progress from past generations while tackling some of the most difficult challenges of our time, including gender-based violence and systemic gender inequality.

The theme of this gathering – from commitment to action – aligns squarely with the call for actionable commitments to fulfil the promise of the Programme of Action of the 1994 International Conference on Population and Development, which transformed the discourse on sustainable development. And indeed, making concrete commitments to realize the promise of Cairo is at the centre of the Nairobi Summit to be held here at the Kenyatta International Convention Centre in less than two months.

Placing women and girls at the center of development, the ICPD was a resounding endorsement of the fact that securing reproductive health, individual rights and women’s empowerment is not just a national obligation, but of great national interest.

Finishing the unfinished business of the ICPD Programme of Action is essential for accelerating progress across the Sustainable Development Goals – including SDG 5 on gender equality. Let us be clear: there can be no SDGs without the ICPD.

And there can be neither without adequate financing. That is why a major theme of the Summit focuses on financing to finish the ICPD Programme of Action and to sustain the gains made. This is critical.

Other themes include achieving universal access to sexual and reproductive health as a part of universal health coverage; drawing on demographic diversity to drive economic growth and sustainable development; ending gender-based violence and harmful practices; and upholding the right to sexual and reproductive health in humanitarian and fragile contexts.

Distinguished delegates,

Removing the remaining barriers that keep women and girls behind will pave the way for prosperous nations. Nations in which women are drivers of inclusive development and all young people, especially young girls, can flourish without any limit to their potential.

From this Women's Affairs Ministers Meeting to the Nairobi Summit to Beijing +25 and onward to the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting in 2020 – each of these platforms provides a unique opportunity for us to mobilize around the ICPD agenda.

At UNFPA, we have been at the forefront of mainstreaming gender equality into development policies and programmes, especially in the critical areas of sexual and reproductive health and reproductive rights, and the prevention of HIV/AIDS.

Access to education and to sexual and reproductive health services and information – as well as removing the stigma surrounding sex and sexual health – are crucial aspects of promoting gender equality and empowering women to make fundamental decisions about their bodies and lives.

While sexual and reproductive health and rights remain vital to women's empowerment, in many countries and communities they can be difficult to address. Indeed, these issues lie at the nexus of social norms, culture, religion, law and justice.

In too many places, young people lack access to the contraception and comprehensive sexuality education that is so fundamental to their health. They lack agency and autonomy over their own bodies, which puts them at risk and thwarts their potential.

That is why our work at UNFPA focuses on achieving three transformative results:

- Zero unmet need for family planning;
- Zero preventable maternal deaths, and
- Zero violence and harmful practices against women and girls

All based on a platform of quality data to ensure that we leave no one behind.

To close the gender gap, we need to close the data gap.

Population data provides crucial information on inequalities in health and access to resources — and the obstacles to universality and equality. With this in mind, UNFPA works closely with governments in the collection, analysis and use of population data for development.

Our data-driven approach to addressing discrimination and exclusion also underpins our new Gender Equality Strategy.

Distinguished delegates,

We will continue to scale up our work on sexual and reproductive health and rights to reach those furthest behind and ensure the meaningful participation of young people in efforts to build a more peaceful, gender-equal and sustainable world.

Our actions are possible only through the dedication of our national partners around the world, including the 53 Commonwealth countries, whose voices form a united and powerful chorus on the global political stage.

As we commemorate the 50th anniversary of UNFPA and the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the ICPD, we also mark 70 years since the formation of the modern Commonwealth.

We applaud the steadfast commitment of the Commonwealth to empowering women and girls and lifting up young people, and trust you will use the power of your leadership to encourage national commitments to achieve the unfinished agenda of the ICPD.

The last time I was in Kenya, I was reminded of the proverb: “When sleeping women awaken, mountains move.” Let’s move mountains. Let’s seize this moment, together.

We look forward to reuniting here in Nairobi, from 12 to 14 November, for the Nairobi Summit on ICPD25, co-convened by UNFPA with the Governments of Kenya and Denmark.

From the Caribbean to Europe and from Africa to the Pacific Islands – an impressive group of Commonwealth countries will be joining us for the milestone event. We urge all governments to participate at the highest level.

The Summit will be a pivotal moment to mobilize the political and financial commitments so urgently needed to finally and fully implement the visionary ICPD Programme of Action and achieve the Sustainable Development Goals on time, by 2030.

We look forward to exploring new funding mechanisms, and to announcements of new partnerships and commitments to invest.

We need actionable commitments from national governments to fulfil the promise of the ICPD. So let us move forward together to Nairobi and beyond with courage and conviction.

It's about rights and choices. And millions of women and girls are counting on all of us to make the right choice.

Thank you, *Asante sana*.