



Check against Delivery

**2nd Asian Women Parliamentarians'
and Ministers' Conference**

Women and ICPD at 10

Opening Remarks

by

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Madam Chair,
Distinguished Ministers and Delegates,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a great pleasure to be in this beautiful city of Canberra for the 2nd Asian Women Parliamentarians' and Ministers' Conference. I am particularly pleased to be here during the 10th anniversary of the International Conference on Population and Development. We have much to celebrate. I would like to thank the Government of Australia for hosting this important Conference. I would also like to thank the Honourable Kay Patterson, Australia's Minister for Family and Community Services, and Senator Dr. Malinee Sukavejworakit, Secretary-General of the Asian Forum of Parliamentarians on Population Development.

It is with fond memories that I recall the 1st Asian Women Parliamentarians' and Ministers' Conference last October in Manila. With the fitting theme: The Empowerment of Women and Gender Equality, the conference brought together more than 100 participants, including 40 parliamentarians and 10 ministers from 17 countries.

It was also the occasion for the first meeting of the Standing Committee on Women, which was attended by women parliamentarians from 14 countries, and was chaired by Ms. Kelly Hoare, MP of Australia. It was agreed that the role of the committee is to promote gender issues in the Asian Forum of Parliamentarians on Population and Development and to recommend gender-related programmes and activities to the AFPPD Executive Committee. This is an important step forward, and this meeting is a testament to the progress that is being made.

As we all know, we cannot achieve greater progress in development and peace, unless and until women are full and equal partners in society and in government. I am very pleased to see so many women leaders here today.

Advancing gender equality and equity and the empowerment of women, eliminating all kinds of violence against women, and ensuring women's ability to control their own fertility are cornerstones of population and development programmes. This is stated clearly as principle 4 of the ICPD Programme of Action. The Cairo agenda contains an entire chapter devoted to empowerment and the status of women, the girl child, and male responsibilities and participation. These areas are central not only to the Cairo agenda but also to the international development and human rights agendas, and to the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals. I am most pleased that all of you have come together here in Canberra to make these issues a central topic of discussion.

This meeting in Canberra is one of many that are taking place this year to commemorate the 10th anniversary of the historic Cairo Conference. There have also been regional review meetings in Bangkok in December 2002 for the Asian and Pacific nations, in Trinidad and Tobago in November 2003 for Caribbean countries, in January in Geneva for European nations, in March in Santiago for the Latin America region, and in Dakar a few weeks ago for the African region.

At each of these meetings, participants have voiced their unequivocal commitment to the ICPD Programme of Action. All of the meetings have had positive outcomes. The overall goal is to re-ignite the vision and spirit of Cairo and the political will to do more.

As far as upcoming meetings, there is also an NGO international roundtable that will take place in September, and the second International Parliamentarians' Conference to take place at the Council of Europe in Strasbourg this October, the first one having been held in November 2002 in Ottawa. The Strasbourg meeting is the only event this year of policymakers, so it will be an exciting, and important, event.

We can take heart in the fact that all over the world, the Cairo agenda is guiding policymaking and legislation to secure sexual and reproductive health and rights and gender equality. The Cairo agenda is working to secure universal access to sexual and reproductive health services, within a framework of human rights. All over the world, increasing numbers of women, and men, are standing up against female genital cutting, trafficking and rape, wife beating, honour killing, and other human rights violations.

There is broad consensus in all regions that the Cairo Programme of Action paves the way to the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals. We will not be able to reduce poverty, hunger and disease, especially HIV/AIDS, unless greater efforts are made for women's rights and to expand access to sexual and reproductive health services. Together we must ensure that these issues are placed at the centre of discussions next year in 2005 as government leaders and officials gather to review the Millennium Declaration.

All over the world, better understanding of these issues has brought real change. Millions of people now have wider choices, and can make key decisions about their own lives.

Since the Cairo Conference in 1994:

- The percentage of couples in the developing world that are able to choose and use contraception has jumped from 55 to 60 per cent;

- Infant mortality rates in developing countries have dropped from 71 to 61 out of every 1,000 babies born;
- Life expectancy in the developing world has jumped from 61 years to 63.

Today in many countries, fewer women now die in childbirth, but this is an area where much more needs to be done.

We can take heart in the fact that pilot programmes for safe motherhood are producing results. Concrete progress has been achieved in China, Cuba, Egypt, Malaysia, Sri Lanka and Thailand, where significant declines in maternal mortality have been registered. This is a result of increased skilled attendance during childbirth and improved access to emergency obstetric care.

After years of little progress, we now know that emergency obstetric care is the key – the foundation – to saving mother's lives. It is now time to scale up efforts and ensure that these life-saving services reach all women. No matter where a woman lives, giving birth should be a time of joy, not a sentence to death. Together, we must also address the issue of unsafe abortion as a matter of public health and in line with the ICPD Programme of Action.

We know what needs to be done. We have made progress since the Cairo Conference and we need to stay on track.

But we cannot move ahead without stronger partnerships – partnerships with governments, non-governmental organizations, the private sector, parliamentarians and the media. It is also about partnership between North and South and South and South.

We cannot place a price on what a woman feels when she is free to chart her own life, free of unwanted pregnancy and the fear of death during childbirth. We cannot put a price on the prevention of HIV/AIDS. And we cannot put a price on the relief a trafficking survivor feels when she is provided with services and counseling to address sexual violence.

Cost Benefits

But we can say for certain that the benefits of these investments are enormous.

In February this year, UNFPA's Executive Director, Dr. Obaid launched a report in London, with The Alan Guttmacher Institute, entitled Adding it Up. The report points out that current programmes providing contraceptives to 500 million women in developing countries already prevent each year:

- 187 million unintended pregnancies
- 105 million abortions
- 2.7 million infant deaths
- 215,000 maternal deaths, and
- 685,000 children losing their mothers.

Imagine what we could accomplish if these life-saving services reached all in need. Today, more than 200 million more women would be using family planning if they had access to these services. Due to shortages in funding, and lack of political will:

- Today, every day, 14,000 people are newly infected with HIV/AIDS.
- Every day, more than 1400 women die during pregnancy and childbirth.

Don't we all feel the anguish of the individual who loses wife or mother in childbirth, because proper care is not available? Of the girl child who is robbed of her childhood and denied of her dreams and hope for life because of child marriage? Of the teenager whose options in life are cut short because she gets pregnant and drops out of school? Of the young man who gets infected with HIV because he did not have a condom? Of the woman who has to go on having children even though she knows her health is at risk? Or of the refugee who has been raped but has nowhere to turn to ask for help?

As we head towards the 10th anniversary of the Cairo Conference, we must build stronger partnerships for action and mobilization.

In closing, I would like to stress that we are on the right track and we must stay the course. UNFPA is honoured to be associated with all of you.

Let us work together and expand our circle of friends to ensure that the promises that were made in Cairo are promises that are kept.

Thank you.