

**UNECE Regional Conference to mark the 30th anniversary of the
International Conference on Population and Development
“Population and Development: Ensuring Rights and Choices”
Geneva, Switzerland**

**Statement by Volker Türk, UN High Commissioner for Human Rights
19 October 2023**

Distinguished delegates,
Colleagues,

Thank you to the UN Economic Commission for Europe and the UN Population Fund for your invitation.

When the Programme of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development was agreed to by States in Cairo 30 years ago, it promised a profound impact on the lives of women and girls.

It promised them the power to make decisions about their own lives, their bodies, and their futures – rights which should have, in the first place, been non-negotiable.

It recognised that gender equality, the empowerment of women, and human rights are the cornerstones of population and development.

And it made clear that reproductive rights were not a new set of rights, but a constellation of freedoms and entitlements already recognized in national and international laws.

With Cairo's Programme of Action, we had a resounding endorsement that securing these rights, and with them, the empowerment of women and girls, is the obligation of every country.

Activists and feminist movements fought long and hard for this groundbreaking change.

We must keep listening to their voices.

Colleagues,

We can be immensely proud of the leaps we have made in women's sexual and reproductive health rights in the last three decades.

The number of global deaths during pregnancy and childbirth has reduced. More newborns survive the first fragile months of life. For adolescents, who face higher risk of complications and death if they give birth, there was a decline in the number of unintended pregnancies that led to childbirth.

Many countries' policies expanded to better reflect the ambition and principles of the ICPD. And substantial investments were made in healthcare, education and social services.

Many are living longer. Many are living healthier. We should celebrate this.

But this is an unfinished agenda. Alongside the progress, we have seen regression.

We still see patchy implementation of the principles laid out in the ICPD Programme of Action in many areas across the world.

Gender equality backlash is spreading, denying women and girls autonomy, the capacity to choose their futures or their roles within families and households, and silencing their voices.

Toxic masculinity – and misogyny – have inflamed and normalised hate.

And a catalogue of overlapping crises – from the pandemic’s consequences, to two billion people living in conflict zones, or economic downturns in many countries – have all disproportionately affected women and girls.

Because babies don’t stop being born during conflict or disaster, and people still get pregnant.

And choices still need to be made.

Right now, with health services under attack, an estimated 50,000 pregnant women in **Gaza** have little choice and little certainty over where they can deliver. This month’s earthquake in western **Afghanistan** has made pregnant women – who already struggled to access health care - even more vulnerable. And as war continues in **Ukraine**, women and girls still need access to life-saving sexual and reproductive health services.

Colleagues,

An estimated [44 per cent of partnered women](#) who are married or in a union across 68 countries don’t have the ability to make their own decisions on sexual relations, use of contraceptives, and health care – despite work done to achieve [SDG target 5.6.1](#).

Women's right to decide - free of discrimination, coercion and violence - if and when to have children, how many and with whom, needs to be guaranteed.

This is all the more the case as progress on maternal mortality has stagnated in the last decade. Every two minutes, a woman will die due to complications in pregnancy and childbirth.

Most maternal deaths occur in low and middle-income countries, although disparities persist in all countries, disproportionately affecting the most marginalised women and girls.

The vast majority of these deaths are avoidable due to lack of access to quality health services or to a trained health professional.

All are tragic and unacceptable.

I was struck by many of the statistics laid out in the recent UNECE report referring to the 56 countries in the region. The fact that women in Central Asian and North American countries have triple the lifetime risk of death in pregnancy or childbirth than women in Western Europe. The fact that more than one third of countries don't have a national strategy on adolescent health. And shockingly, that widespread gender-based violence has increasingly become a socially accepted norm in several countries.

These statistics are not a natural occurrence for us to simply accept: they are the direct consequence of actions that discriminate, divide; actions which strip women and girls of decisions over their own bodies; and actions which can ultimately kill.

As you know, perhaps nowhere is a woman's autonomy and ability to make her own choices about her body and life more hotly contested than when she seeks to access safe abortion services.

An estimated 33 million unsafe abortions are conducted globally each year. They are often the result of restrictive legislation that instead of reducing the incidence of abortion, only drives it underground, posing significant threats to a woman's health and life.

We know that unsafe abortion is one of the leading causes of maternal mortality.

And we know that restrictions on, or lack of access to, abortion services can cause a range of human rights violations: the right to privacy, the right to equality and non-discrimination and the right to be free from torture, cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment and punishment.

I welcome steps by many countries in the last five years – including in the UNECE region – to liberalize their legislation, whether through decriminalizing abortion, expanding legal grounds for it, or removing burdensome access barriers.

These are important steps in the right direction.

Colleagues,

Human rights reversals of all kinds are accelerating around the globe, veering us offtrack to achieve the 2030 Sustainable Agenda and the ICPD Programme of Action.

We see mounting inequalities, a cost-of-living crisis and worldwide economic uncertainty.

In 14 countries in the UNECE region, one in five people face poverty, with younger and older people the most affected.

Flawed economic policies within and between countries are powering the cycles of discrimination and inequality.

It's not too late to course correct.

My Office is working with States to bolster their efforts to infuse their economies with human rights.

A human rights economy upholds the inherent dignity and worth of every individual. What does it do?

It centres people and the planet in all policies, plans and programmes.

It **empowers people to participate** in decision-making that affects their lives, especially those who have been historically discriminated, including women and older people.

To close the inequality gap, it delivers maximum social protection.

Quality and affordable health services, for everyone.

Empowering population policies, grounded in the promotion of sexual and reproductive health and rights.

And all children and young people are in school, enabling them to make their own decisions about their futures and bodies.

Colleagues,

We need a shift of mindset.

To change lives, and to save lives, we need to ensure the fundamentals promised in Cairo thirty years ago are upheld – for all women and girls, no matter their age, their migration status, or any other factor.

Comprehensive sexuality education within schools and outside of them. Access to modern forms of contraception, including emergency contraception. Access to quality sexual and reproductive health services, including safe and timely abortion services and maternal and newborn care.

And the freedom to make their own choices.

This is a critical year for reflection and to rekindle progress.

It is thirty years since Cairo, and we also celebrate 75 years of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, a document that famously affirms we are all “born free and equal in dignity and rights.”

In the spirit of Cairo, and in the spirit of the vision contained in the Universal Declaration, I hope we can all recommit to the promises of rights and dignity for all women and girls.

Thank you.

