



**UNFPA Side Event
High Level Political Forum**

Intergenerational Action for Bodily Autonomy - Accelerating SDG3

Convened by UNFPA and the Government of Argentina

07:30-09:00 Eastern Standard Time, 8 July 2021

Opening Remarks

Thank you Eunice Leyva Garcia,

Honorable Ministers, Excellences, ASG Petersen, distinguished Delegates, colleagues and friends, it is an absolute pleasure to join you virtually from Johannesburg. On behalf of Executive Director Dr. Natalia Kanem, who would have loved to be with you this morning, I would like to thank the Government of Argentina for co-convening this critical dialogue with UNFPA and to warmly welcome you all.

At this side event to the High-Level Political Forum we have the distinct **opportunity to elevate the centrality of bodily autonomy as a catalyst and cornerstone of efforts to achieve good health and well-being, gender equality, and sustainable development outcomes**, in this Decade of accelerated action. And firmly state up front that through intergenerational advocacy and action for bodily autonomy we will be able to accelerate progress towards the SDGs.

The forceful momentum created at the **ICPD25 Summit in Nairobi in 2019** and the commitments generated by diverse stakeholders to **ensure we finish the unfinished agenda of the ICPD Programme of Action** and especially our collective commitment to advance universal access to sexual and reproductive health and rights and gender transformative action for girls' and women's, **must be built on**. As Dr Kanem would say, we must March on!

Indeed, UNFPA has been working tirelessly with our partners to **strengthen attention and action to bodily autonomy** including in our role as co-convenor with our partners of the **generation equality action coalition** on bodily autonomy and SRHR. (complement Argentina, Burkina Faso, Denmark, France and North Macedonia).

Last week in Paris at the Generation Equality Forum, we witnessed young feminist leaders and representatives from all over the world, call for **greater attention, funding, and action to promote and protect bodily autonomy** as central to achieving SDG 3 Good health and well-being, and SDG 5 - gender equality and women's empowerment.

The UNFPA **flagship State of the World Population report 2021: *My Body is My Own***, states that communities and countries can only flourish when all women are protected and have the power to make their own informed decisions about their bodies and lives – **the power to say yes and the right to say no!**

Distinguished delegates, **sustainable development can only happen if populations are healthy**, and the path to good health and wellbeing for all is **inextricably** linked to bodily autonomy: bodily autonomy being defined as the ability of women and girls to make their own choices about their bodies, their lives and their futures.

A UNFPA study referenced in our flagship report revealed the disturbing statistic that only 55 per cent of women (that is just slightly over half) can make their own decisions about their bodies, **including whether to have sex, use contraception or access healthcare services.**

In addition, **every single day** thirty-three thousand (33,000) girls are locked into marriages against their will.

And **in a single year, 4.1 million girls** are at risk of female genital mutilation. These are clear violations of girls and women's bodily autonomy, integrity and human rights.

Imagine a young woman who cannot define whether, when or how many children to have, or a young girl who cannot choose to stay in school but instead is being married off at 15 years, or a woman who is subjected to a life of intimate partner violence. Such a girl or woman stands little

chance of self-determination, or empowerment in the home, the community, the workforce or anywhere else.

In denying her of her fundamental human rights, she is entrapped in a cycle of injustice, and a downward spiral of self-deprecation and self-doubt.

This in turn impacts her immediate family, households, societies, economies and reverberates across the world - and across the Sustainable Development Goals!

In short, this affects us all.

This is why, as **UNFPA we work for a world where every woman, every girl and every young person:**

can realize their full potential;

can have agency, autonomy and confidence to chart their future;

can have the information, education, services and means to make their own choices on sexual and reproductive health and rights;

and can do this free from discrimination, coercion and violence.

Today's important dialogue comes at a critical point in time as the world continues to grapple with the crippling COVID-19 pandemic. We have seen **heightened forms of all types of multidimensional and intersecting inequalities.**

There has been a disturbing upsurge in gender-based violence, in child marriage, and in unintended teen pregnancy, as access to integrated and comprehensive sexual and reproductive health services has been interrupted/disrupted.

As UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres eloquently stated in his remarks at the Paris Generation Equality Forum, "*the realization of the equal rights of half our population is the unfinished human rights struggle of this century...*" I would add that this is also the unfinished

development struggle, as the world cannot move forward, indeed the world cannot develop, when half the human race cannot make their decisions and are held back.

Distinguished friends - we know what must be done.

And definitely we know we must pursue intergenerational dialogue, collaboration and action across diverse actors of all ages as an essential means to achieving the SDGs.

Whole societies, governments, leaders, academia, policy makers, civil societies and young people need to rally together even more, toward the common goal of rights and choices for all; and I have seen fantastic examples of this actually taking place in the field and I know the distinguished speakers and panelists today will share their experiences.

Secondly, we must all be advocating for universal health coverage as part of our efforts to “build better” as we move forward together. And again I reiterate – there can be no health and wellbeing if there is no bodily autonomy and this can’t happen if we do not achieve stronger and more resilient health systems including universal health coverage that upholds SRHR and that incorporates empowering girls and boys to make healthy decisions about their bodies, health and lifestyles.

Third, is the priority we must put on collective action to dismantle discriminatory attitudes, practices and harmful social norms including gender stereotypes and stigma and racism. And that spills over to policies and laws that restrict access to SRHR and CSE for some.

Fourth is our collective action to leave no one behind.

Supporting every person’s ability, especially those furthest behind in exercising their own decision about their bodies must be central to our collective mission. The voices of women and girls, men and boys, across generations, across geographies, across diversities, across abilities, will allow for the lived experiences, perspective and priorities of all to shape sustainable development policies and programmes and deliver on our commitments and promises.

Let me end by restating what is the bottom line – the **right to bodily autonomy is an inalienable, human right**, and when we uphold the rights of women and girls to exercise decisions related to their bodies, we uplift families, communities, entire nations and in so doing, we accelerate a sustainable present and future for us all.

Once again, welcome to all and without further ado, I hand back over to Eunice as we listen and learn from the generations of experts and champions we have with us today – indeed a cross generation of and for equality and a sustainable healthy world for us all.

I thank you.