

# INTERNATIONAL CAMPAIGN FOR WOMEN'S RIGHT TO SAFE ABORTION

International Conference on Population & Development+25  
Nairobi, Kenya, 12-13-14 November 2019

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Press Release: 22 November 2019

## What was it about: some history

This conference has taken place every five years, beginning in 1994. At each follow-up meeting, the overarching purpose has been to measure progress (and the lack of progress) in implementing the 1994 Programme of Action, which was agreed by acclamation by the representatives of 179 countries, and the follow-up actions added at subsequent conferences. An excellent summary of the aims, goals and history of the conference can be found [here](#) and a 20th anniversary edition of the Programme of Action can be found [here](#) along with a global report on progress published in 2014.

In 1994, UNFPA, the conference convenor, described the Programme of Action as: *“a bold new vision about the relationships between population, development and individual well-being... remarkable in its recognition that [sexual and] reproductive health and reproductive rights, as well as women's empowerment and gender equality, are cornerstones of population and development programmes. The Consensus is rooted in principles of human rights and respect for national sovereignty and various religious and cultural backgrounds.”*

Although the original aim was to accomplish the goals in 20 years, much remains to achieve. As UNFPA wrote this year: *“There has been a 25% increase in global contraceptive prevalence rate around the world. Adolescent births have declined steeply, and the global maternal mortality ratio has fallen. But progress has been slow and uneven. Hundreds of millions of women around the world are still not using modern contraceptives to prevent unwanted pregnancies, and global targets on reducing maternal deaths have not been met.”*

Even so, there has been a sea change in thinking about these issues since 1994. New understandings have been formed of gender and sexuality issues and the consequences of diversity in population dynamics, i.e. problems of ageing societies vs. those dominated by young populations, which have created new expectations and demands. The climate emergency is raising awareness of the need to rethink the meaning of development and our use of natural resources, as we face a growing threat to life on the Earth itself, due to our unsustainable way of life, which must be addressed urgently.

It seems the 2019 ICPD in Nairobi will be the last, and many will breathe a sigh of relief to see it go. Yet all the goals remain to be met in the context of the Sustainability Development Goals and Universal Health Coverage, of which they are a part. The overarching importance of human rights is under threat in many countries, and especially women's rights. This was reflected in the fact that so many leaders omitted any reference to rights even while expressing apparent support for sexual and reproductive health goals, an omission that does not bode well – though rights were staunchly defended by many in the meeting too. Importantly, the demand for autonomy has been taken up by young people across the globe, as it continues to be by women's rights advocates, and no matter what leaders in the meeting did or did not say, these demands cannot be set aside.

On the positive side, the meeting expressed strong support for opportunities for youth; for the provision of sexuality education; and for the need for women and youth to be change-makers. It committed once again to reducing maternal deaths in pregnancy and childbirth and to increasing access to contraception to reduce unwanted pregnancies, as it has done since 1994; and for ending gender-based violence, though no effective means to do so has yet been found.

Most disappointing, however, was that in spite of a weak and ineffective display of opposition by a tiny minority of countries to the broad goals of ICPD, and even after 25 years of pressure by women's movements, most global leaders and UNFPA signally failed to endorse universal access to safe abortion, let alone call for the decriminalisation of abortion, on the floor of the meeting. They failed to acknowledge, let alone insist, that to achieve the ICPD goal of zero unnecessary maternal deaths, there must be an end to the continuing, substantial morbidity and mortality women and girls are suffering from, due to illegal and dangerous abortions, most egregiously on the very continent where this Summit took place. Yet they know full well that this is true.

In the days leading up to the Summit, the UN OHCHR Working Group on Discrimination against Women and Girls, along with 27 Special Rapporteurs, Independent Experts and Working Groups who are part of the Special Procedures of the UN Human Rights Council, challenged the conference as follows:

[Time for world leaders to honour 25-year-old promises and renew their commitments on women's rights, say human rights experts](#), 11 November 2019

*"We call on the international community to reaffirm unambiguously its commitments to fulfil the unfinished agenda of ICPD and increase its political will towards and investment on women's and girls' sexual and reproductive health and rights. We call upon decision-makers to always put women's and girls' human rights at the centre of policy considerations and to meaningfully involve women and girls themselves in all decisions affecting them.*

*"The experts highlighted major achievements including a notable fall of around 38% in the world's maternal mortality rate between 2000 and 2017. "Yet still more than 800 women are dying daily from preventable causes related to pregnancy and childbirth, many of whom are girls," the experts said.*

*"Action was also urgently needed on other reproductive rights, they said, despite the generally wider availability of modern contraception and progress on repealing laws criminalising abortion.*

*"Criminalising termination of pregnancy is one of the most damaging manifestations of instrumentalising women's bodies and health, subjecting them to risks to their lives or health and depriving them of autonomy in decision-making," the experts said. "Twenty-five million unsafe abortions occur each year and some 214 million women are deprived of access to essential modern contraception, often leading to unwanted pregnancies...."*

This statement (and the above is only an excerpt) came from the world's most prominent human rights experts. Now the Summit is over, we await our governments' next steps.

## **The conference**

Over 9,500 people attended the conference from 170 countries – including representatives of national, regional and international governmental and non-governmental bodies – from the highest levels of leadership to the grassroots. The conference agenda can be found [here](#). It included nearly 150 plenary and concurrent sessions throughout the three days. There were endless speeches, panels, side events, breakfasts, lunches, dinners and receptions, organised by governments, donors and participating groups. There was non-stop networking.

And as with all such conferences, huge amounts of money were pledged that may or may not be received or spent wisely, and every donor in sight was pursued for more. It was, at its worst, just a grand performance – orchestrated by those with money and power – and at its best, a productive and exciting meeting place for increasing understanding and consensus, making agreements and debating differences.

## **Safe abortion at the conference**

On the face of it, the words "the right to safe abortion" were perhaps the least mentioned in the public spaces of the conference. But with an average of one in four pregnancies worldwide ending in an induced abortion, the right to safe abortion as a women's health issue was omnipresent and everyone knew it. Gita Sen – who has worked for 35 years nationally and internationally on population policies, reproductive and sexual health, gender equality and women's human rights, as well as issues of

poverty, human development and labour markets, and who helped to shape the global paradigm shift on population and development – spoke of the need for safe abortion in one of the plenary sessions, to loud cheers from the floor. When Naisola Likimani from She Decides spoke, she too got the same response. Moreover, at the closing plenary, Ambassador Ib Petersen, Denmark’s Special Envoy for ICPD25, singled out the importance of "access to safe abortion for every woman" when she called on everyone in the meeting to “walk the talk” between now and 2030.



PHOTO: <http://www.nairobisummitcpd.org/>

### **The Campaign’s commitment to ICPD**

Every government and NGO attending the conference was invited to make a commitment to one of the conference’s three goals by 2030: zero preventable maternal deaths, zero unmet need for family planning, and zero gender-based violence and harmful practices against women. In total, more than 1,200 commitments were submitted.

The Campaign’s commitment was to campaign for the following, to achieve zero preventable maternal deaths by 2030:

- decriminalisation of abortion,
- universal access to safe abortion in every country,
- availability of safe abortion at the women’s/girl’s request

in recognition that safe abortion is necessary to achieve gender equality and of women’s and girls’ right to life and health.

### **The Campaign’s panel**

There were some 140 concurrent sessions but only two whose titles made it clear that their subject was the right to safe abortion. The Campaign organised one of them, with representatives from among our members as speakers. The other was organised by Marie Stopes International, entitled “Ending Unsafe Abortion by 2030”. Both panels went very well. Some 300 people attended the Campaign’s panel; the room was packed.

## INTERNATIONAL CAMPAIGN FOR WOMEN'S RIGHT TO SAFE ABORTION

### Safe Abortion in Health Systems: Regional Challenges, Progress and Accelerators



The WHO Safe Abortion, Technical and Policy Guidance for Health Systems defines the international standards for the provision of safe abortion services globally. This panel will present regional progress around the achievements towards these standards. It will focus on why it is critical to make safe abortion universally accessible if we want to achieve zero preventable maternal deaths. Panelists will argue that motherhood must be voluntary, which means safe abortion should be treated as a legitimate form of healthcare, available on request from public health services, in line with WHO best practice guidelines. The panel will review the evidence on unintended and unwanted pregnancy globally. We will show that 25 years on, it is clear that increases in the use of contraception and provision of post-abortion care alone, without making abortions safe and legal, have not and will not prevent unwanted pregnancies or complications and deaths from unsafe abortion. The session will focus on how countries must fulfil ICPD's commitments on women's health and rights through universal access to safe abortion.

The panel is convened by the International Campaign for Women's Right to Safe Abortion, with representatives from our members: Young Activist Network for Abortion Advocacy, Asian-Pacific Resources and Research Centre for Women, Consortio Latinoamericano contra el Aborto Inseguro (CLACAI), Ipas Africa Alliance, Groupe Tawhida Ben Cheikh Tunisia, and La Mesa por la Vida y la Salud de las Mujeres Colombia.

DATE: Wednesday 13 November 2019  
Concurrent session at 13:00 - 14:30 EAT  
LOCATION: Courtyard 5, KICC

Speakers: Wafa Adam; Dr. Hedia Belhadi; Susana Chávez; Clayborne Cook; Dr. Ana Cristina González Vélez; Dr. Ernest Nyamato; Dr. Shilpa Shroff; Dr. Sivananthi Thanenthiran



### Our panellists



From left to right:

- Shilpa Shroff (Chair), Director of Advocacy, International Campaign for Women's Right to Safe Abortion, India
- Susana Chavez (Co-Chair), Director, Consorcio Latinoamericano contra el Aborto Inseguro, Peru
- Ana Cristina González Vélez, La Mesa por la Vida y la Salud de las Mujeres, Colombia
- Sivananthi Thanenthiran, Executive Director, Asia-Pacific Resources and Research Centre for Women, Malaysia
- Hedia Belhadj, Groupe Tawhida Ben Cheikh, Tunisia
- Wafa MI Adam, Young Activists Network for Abortion Advocacy (YANAA/ICWRSA), Sudan
- Ernest Nyamato, Country Director, Ipas Africa Alliance, Kenya
- Clay Cook, Project Coordinator, Reproductive Health Training Center, Moldova (not present)

Their presentations centred around two main questions:

- How has the space for safe abortion changed in your region since the ICPD Conference in Cairo in 1994? What are the major concerns you see?
- What steps need to be taken to expand access to safe abortion now?

You can read their slides [here](#). Some of the main points they raised were:

- in Africa, the cost of unsafe abortion is cripplingly high – millions of dollars annually – it would be far better to provide safe abortion services instead of treating serious morbidity and having so many women dying unnecessarily from complications of unsafe abortions;
- in the Middle East & North Africa, the high incidence of unsafe abortions must be understood within a socio-cultural context affected by ongoing political tension, war and displacement of populations;
- in Eastern Europe and Central Asia, in spite of good access to abortion services, dilatation & curettage is still the most commonly used abortion method, even though it has not been recommended by the World Health Organization for more than two decades;
- in Latin America, the fact that most abortions remain a crime causes pervasive and profound damage to both providers and women;
- the insurmountable barriers faced by young women and girls seeking abortions, including the mistaken belief by health professionals that they are unable to make informed choices, makes them the most likely to seek unsafe abortions and experience the worst outcomes; and
- in Asia, and indeed across the world, access to safe abortion is restricted by barriers and more barriers – criminal prosecution, restrictive legal grounds, low upper time limits, permission required from others (husbands, parents, doctors, courts), and the power of refusal by providers.

The panel also reminded everyone that abortion remains a serious global public health problem, which had already been acknowledged at the first ICPD in 1994. In spite of the advances brought by abortion pills, there are still almost 25 million unsafe abortions annually out of a total of 69 million, almost all in the global south. In many countries in the world, only a lot of money can buy a safe abortion, and even then it is often a gamble.

During the Q&A, many questions were asked regarding strategies for safe abortion advocacy at international, regional and national levels: issues of political will on the part of politicians, how to garner support from religious leaders for women's right to life and health, the importance of sharing women's experiences and of bringing women on board to support safe abortion advocacy work. Many people were inspired by the existence of an abortion rights movement that is growing across all world regions, and they wanted to know how it can be strengthened.

Lastly, there was a lot of interest in YANAA (Young Activists Network for Abortion Advocacy), the Campaign's new network for young activists, devoted entirely to issues of safe abortion.



YANAA meeting Nairobi

### The opposition to what ICPD stands for

As we have reported several times this year, there has been an organised opposition to the aims and agendas of every United Nations conference related to health and development in 2019. The main conferences to be attacked before Nairobi were those on the Sustainable Development Goals and Universal Health Coverage. In each case, the opposition was focused especially on rejecting sexual and reproductive health and rights (and of course abortion), rejecting gender equality and all other issues related to gender, sexuality and rights. This opposition has consistently been expressed by the same small group of conservative and right-wing governments and NGOs, as well as conservative religious leaders, and has been ineffective in altering those conferences' outcomes.

In Nairobi, a US government-led statement of opposition to the ICPD+25 goals was read out, signed by the following other countries – Belarus, Brazil, Egypt, Haiti, Hungary, Libya, Senegal, St Lucia and Uganda.

Open Democracy's [report](#) on the opposition in Nairobi says that the opposition were few in numbers and isolated at a counter-summit they themselves had organised, hoping to challenge the representativeness of ICPD+25. A photograph of one of their workshops shows only a speaker and eight scattered participants, compared to the tens of thousands who attended ICPD+25. A demonstration they had called for the third day outside the conference centre apparently attracted only a dozen people, although they had predicted thousands would show up. Yet [France24](#) carried a photo of a substantial group with expensive placards rejecting abortion, and the same photo was used in other news reports too.

Moreover, Hedia Belhadj from Groupe Tawhida Ben Cheikh, Tunisia, one of our Campaign panellists, had a different impression: *“Anti-abortion flyers were distributed to people waiting in queues and throughout the event. US pressure on country delegations and on the atmosphere around the event was certainly felt. Arab State delegations were approached one by one to be part of an anti-choice statement proposing that the commitments should not go beyond the ICPD agenda. Lebanon and Tunisia turned down the offer. The final statement for this initiative was led by a person from Egypt. Moreover, compared to the 1994 ICPD, I have to say I did not see any progress on most governments' positions vis-à-vis abortion (with a few exceptions: Ethiopia, South Africa), whereas other human rights themes, hidden or not recognised in 1994, such as respect for diversity (including sexual orientation) did become more visible in Nairobi.”*

The US Ambassador to Kenya, Kyle McCarter, was quoted by [France.info](#) in the Kenyan Daily Nation as saying, on behalf of the US, that: “the reality is that pro-abortion groups are using the conference as a way to advance their agenda”. How then, does he explain that abortion was the least mentioned subject in the meeting? And why does he think that support for safe abortion as part of a women' health agenda is a deep, dark secret?

Some media reports, such as [this one](#), claimed that the conference was “controversy-ridden”. Some, in contrast, were critical of the US government-led opposition, such as [this one](#).

How much opposition actually existed is hard to tease out. Was the opposition actually silenced in this important international public space? Because even as the right to safe abortion barely made it to the floor of the conference, the opposition did not make it to the floor either. It is certainly true that there exist deep disagreements on many of the issues addressed at Nairobi, many of which centre of whether women/young people and many others who are looked down on should have the right to determine their own lives or not. The silence (lack of visible conflict?) that resulted may be what UNFPA fervently wished for, and who wouldn't, in their shoes? Whether it was a good thing remains to be seen going forward, and should inform the conversation about the value of the conference itself.

### **Why the ICPD goals are crucial for women and girls, and must include the right to safe abortion**

Ana Cristina González Vélez, from La Mesa por la Vida y la Salud de las Mujeres, Colombia, also a Campaign panellist, wrote: *"I don't think abortion got enough attention in the official agenda. But the tone of our panel discussion was high and the rooms during both the panels on abortion were full of people. In addition, during the reading of the commitments by governments and civil society organisations, the Articulación Feminista Marcosur committed to fight for the total decriminalisation of abortion. So the subject of abortion was there, and it was part of the agenda for all of us fighting for safe abortion as part of the ICPD Agenda. It was also part of the Puebla commitments during the Latin American and Caribbean Regional Preparatory Meeting and the Nairobi Declaration."*

Members and friends of the International Campaign for Women's Right to Safe Abortion went to Nairobi to stand up for universal access to safe abortion, leaving no one behind. We have never accepted the 1994 Cairo compromise on abortion because for the past 25 years, it has been used to keep millions of abortions both illegal and unsafe. Abortion is a necessary part of our lives; we make no apologies to anyone.

In closing this report, we call attention to the reality experienced by many Kenyan women and girls who were not present at the Summit, capturing exactly why the conference goals and our own are essential to the lives of girls and women:

*"Based on current statistical trends, 3,000 Kenyan girls between the age of 10 and 19 had unprotected sex while the ICPD was going on. One hundred and five of them dropped out of school and three died of pregnancy-related complications. A total of 3,600 women and girls had abortions and 45% of them were girls between the ages of 10 and 19. Nine people were raped and 45 were defiled. Less than ten of these cases will lead to convictions. This conference mattered to Kenya and President Kenyatta's opening speech said as much."* by Irungu Houghton, [Standard Media](#), 16-11-19

Press release by Marge Berer, Director of Publications & Meetings,  
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w/contributions from Christina Boateng, Shilpa Shroff, Ana Cristina González Vélez, Hedia Belhadj

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