

Message from UNFPA Executive Director Dr. Natalia Kanem on Human Rights Day

10 December 2019

Youth Standing up for Human Rights

On this Human Rights Day, we at UNFPA salute the young people who are pushing for progress and making meaningful change in their communities, countries and around the world.

Twenty-five years ago, women's rights activists and advocates galvanized the political will that led to the Cairo International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) and its historic Programme of Action. Many of them were young women, fighting to change the status quo and transform people's lives through their unwavering commitment to sexual and reproductive health and rights.

Today, we see the same drive from young women activists helping tear down the remaining barriers standing between them and their rights and choices. As part of the SDG generation, they know that having agency over their bodies is not only the foundation for a better future, but a fundamental human right.

At the ICPD a quarter century ago, leaders promised to put women and girls at the centre of development, uphold reproductive rights for all, meet the special needs of young people and support their participation in all spheres of society. This promise was kept for some, but not for all.

We know that the promise of the ICPD can only be fully achieved with youth leadership and activism. Their voices are louder and more prominent than ever before. They are campaigning to end violence, sexual assault and abuse, as we have seen during this year's 16 Days of Activism against Gender-based Violence, which ends today. They are challenging discriminatory norms, taking action and speaking out every day about the issues that directly affect their lives.

That is why young people took centre stage at the Nairobi Summit on ICPD25 last month. At the Summit, we heard from a remarkable group of young human rights champions representing the perspectives of indigenous communities and people of African descent, persons with disabilities and those of diverse sexual orientations and gender identities. Their voices underscored the urgent action needed to realize the rights-based vision of the ICPD.

Let's advance rights and choices for all by supporting youth activists, youth networks and youth organizations, amplifying the voices of young people as transformative agents of change. Together, let us be loud and clear: reproductive rights are human rights, and we are committed to protecting and defending them, today and every day.