Since then, we have made enormous strides in fulfilling the ICPD agenda. But millions are still denied their health and rights every day—something that can and must end.

How can we create a more equitable future?

- Improve access to affordable, quality maternal health services and increase the number of female physicians, which can yield remarkable gains: In India, the number of maternal deaths has fallen from 26 percent of the global total in 1990 to 8 percent in 2020 following such efforts.
- Increase midwife-delivered interventions, which could avert 41 percent of maternal deaths, 39 percent of neonatal deaths and 26 percent of stillbirths.
- Advance women’s equality, which could double the contribution of women to global GDP growth, and could add $12 trillion to global GDP over the course of 10 years.
- Recognize community leadership and partnership as essential to unlocking the potential of all. In northern Canada, the reintroduction of traditional birthing practices has resulted in indigenous women reporting lower stress levels, greater involvement in decision-making and better psychosocial support.

The achievements since 1994 have been many but we must go further. Time and again, the world has seen that efforts to eliminate poor health outcomes and end preventable maternal death are simply not enough to overcome the barriers posed by inequality, discrimination, bias and stigma. Yet this fact offers us perhaps the best chance at achieving our agreed goals—those from both the ICPD and Agenda 2030—to realize the rights and choices of all people. We know what is needed: Vigilance and a renewed commitment to action, not pessimism. We are capable of creating a future that acknowledges the dignity and value of every individual, one which recognizes that assuring the rights of all people means securing the rights of each person. After all, the fabric of humanity is vast and beautiful, but it is only as strong as its most fragile thread.

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What have we achieved?

- Between 2000 and 2020, global maternal mortality declined by 34 per cent.
- Births among girls aged 15 to 19 have fallen by almost one third.
- An historic 162 countries have passed laws against domestic violence.
- The number of new HIV infections in 2021 was almost one third fewer than in 2010.
- From 1990 to 2021, the number of women using modern contraception doubled.

Who has been left behind?

- Between 2016 and 2020, 10 times more women and girls with disabilities are up to 10 times more likely to experience gender-based violence, including sexual violence.
- In 68 countries, a quarter of women still cannot make their own health-care decisions.
- Nearly 100 million women have fallen more quickly for women of higher socio-economic status and for those belonging to ethnic groups that were already better off.
- Out of 32 countries with trend data, 19 have seen improvements in women’s ability to exercise bodily autonomy – while 13 have seen rollbacks.

Where is progress stalling?

- In 68 countries, a quarter of women still cannot make their own decisions about whether to use contraception.
- Research from 25 countries shows that barriers to health care have fallen more quickly for women of higher socio-economic status and for those belonging to ethnic groups that were already better off.
- Out of 32 countries with trend data, 19 have seen improvements in women’s ability to exercise bodily autonomy – while 13 have seen rollbacks.
- A quarter of women cannot say no to sex with their husband or partner.
- Around 800 women still die every day while giving birth: nearly every one of those deaths is preventable. A majority of these deaths are in developing countries.
- Between 2016 and 2020, the global annual reduction in maternal death was effectively zero.
- Women and girls with disabilities are up to 10 times more likely to experience gender-based violence, including sexual violence.

Weaving the path forward

Yet a new vision for the world is gaining momentum, one in which strengthening the rights and welfare of individuals reinforces those of the collective, and vice versa. From climate change to demographic shifts to the digital revolution, the world’s greatest concerns can only be addressed through collective action for the benefit of all.

To ensure that the next 30 years of progress includes everyone, we must pivot towards providing comprehensive, universal and inclusive sexual and reproductive health care and guaranteeing rights for all.

This means designing tailored and targeted health programmes that address the multiple ways economic, social, political and environmental injustice impact people’s health and rights. It also means moving beyond measuring human experiences in broad averages and committing to the collection of disaggregated data across a variety of factors.

Solidarity works. We are at a pivotal point in history, a moment that requires a global reckoning to overhaul the structures and systems that continue to hold millions back from realizing their full potential. Much faster progress in ending marginalization and discrimination is possible and necessary – but we need to start right now.