



Decimotercera Conferencia Regional sobre la Mujer
de América Latina y el Caribe

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**Panel de alto nivel:
La igualdad de género en el centro del desarrollo sostenible**

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Latin America and Caribbean Regional Conference on Women

High-level Panel:

Gender Equality at the Centre of Sustainable Development

Intervention by Dr. Babatunde Osotimehin

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“Physical autonomy, freedom and rights”

10:30-13:00, 27 October 2016, Montevideo

It is a great pleasure to participate in this high level panel and to comment on the document on “Equality and women’s autonomy in the sustainable development agenda”, particularly Chapter 3 about physical autonomy, freedom and rights.

I would like to focus my intervention on the theme of our recently launched *State of World Population* report, which highlights the importance of investing in adolescent girls and the benefits of reaching them by age 10, as they begin their journey through adolescence to adulthood.

This focus on the importance of investing in adolescent girls was present in the Cairo International Conference on Population and Development Programme of Action in 1994. It was also underlined more broadly in the regional review of the Cairo Programme of Action at 20, which had as its outcome the Montevideo Consensus, adopted here in August 2013.

Importance of gender equality:

Our latest SWOP report focuses on the plight of today's estimated 60 million 10-year-old girls, with special emphasis on those living in environments of gender inequality. Patriarchal societies in which the girl, when she reaches puberty, is redefined and confined to roles and responsibilities that do not take into account her will, and that stunt the development of her full potential as a person. The denial of her basic human rights stifles her aspirations of autonomy and the ability to take control of her life.

We at UNFPA are committed to working together with our partners, through a life cycle approach, in preparing adolescent girls and protecting and promoting their rights so they may find a path to autonomy.

The path is fairly simple: it includes completing primary and secondary education - maybe tertiary education - being employed or capable of generating income, and postponing marriage and motherhood.

This region has made great strides towards this vision, and it has a responsibility to share its successes with other regions. As the ECLAC report acknowledges, gender equality in LAC has progressed impressively. We are especially satisfied with the policy and legal framework that has emerged in the region. It has closed many of the loopholes that are still present in other regions. We need to encourage more South-South and triangular cooperation on these issues.

Gender parity in education is an important comparative advantage for this region. We need to understand how this was achieved, without forgetting the fact that these are national averages and that coverage is not equal to quality.

Better teaching is needed for girls in the region to truly develop their cognitive capacities and life skills.

A recent report¹ by the World Bank, for example, noted that many of the more developed countries of the region (Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Costa Rica, Mexico, Peru and Uruguay) still lagged below the OECD average in the PISA mathematics tests. The report also noted that, in the best case scenario, teachers spend 65% or less of class time on instruction. This is considerably below the recommended 85%.

Chapter 3 of the ECLAC report also highlights the need to strengthen sexuality education in order to prevent and reduce adolescent pregnancy. As you know, this is an area in which UNFPA invests a great amount of its efforts.

Given the limitations that persist among teachers in the region, preparing them to actually provide rights-based, gender-sensitive, evidence-based, age-appropriate comprehensive sexuality education remains a challenge. We look forward to the update of the technical guidelines for sexuality education, being done under the auspices of UNESCO, with whom UNFPA has been actively collaborating.

¹ “Profesores excelentes, cómo mejorar el aprendizaje en América Latina y el Caribe, World Bank, 2014

Much of the recent public debate on gender issues in the region has revolved around sexuality education. I think those debates, particularly when issues related to sexual orientation and gender identity are included, provide us with an important opportunity to clarify the fundamentals of gender theory.

Just as gender inequality and discrimination are contrary to human rights and sustainable development, keeping large swaths of the population from contributing fully to society; it is also critical to ensure that we leave no one behind when it comes to knowledge about our bodies and our sexuality. Everybody needs to know how to take care of themselves. This is essential to the construction of autonomy.

Adolescent sexual and reproductive health and rights:

Sexual and reproductive health and rights are an indispensable aspect of women's autonomy, as the ECLAC report acknowledges.

On this issue, let me first start with a short reference to data. Within the framework of the 2030 Agenda, UNFPA has a shared responsibility with other UN agencies to provide assistance to countries here represented in the monitoring the SDGs.

And we are particularly eager to work on bringing our longstanding partnerships with national statistical offices to help disaggregate data on adolescents and maintain the region's capacity to follow up on certain indicators, such as adolescent birth rate, child marriage, HIV incidence and maternal mortality, among others.

Given that external funding is becoming scarce for such key surveys as the Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS) and the Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys (MICS), this regional conference, together with the regional conference on population and development, have to work closely with the statistical commission in order to develop a viable road map.

This would need to look into the question of indicators, sources of verification and funding in order to have a clear base to assess progress made in adolescent sexual and reproductive health and rights.

Moreover, we need to look into the use of administrative records for more pointed and local information; that is an area of data production that definitely needs to be pursued further.

Regarding the very important points raised by the ECLAC report on the physical autonomy of women and SRHR, our SWOP identifies 10 basic stepping stones to autonomy:

- Legal provisions ensuring the equal rights of girls;
- Prohibition of harmful practices and the establishment of a minimum age of marriage at 18;
- Quality education for all that defends gender equality;
- Periodic health care for girls, looking at both physical and mental health;
- Comprehensive sexuality education from age 10;
- Inclusive policies for girls in vulnerable situations;
- Monitoring and promoting investments in girls;
- Special protection measures for mental health and the elimination of child labour;
- Better monitoring of the status of girls through disaggregated data;
- Evidence-based policy dialogues to change gender norms and combat discrimination.

Sexual and reproductive health and rights are elements that both enable and are enabled by those stepping stones.

Unfortunately, in this region and beyond, access to SRHR services for adolescents is always a contentious issue. The new generation of national plans for reduction of adolescent pregnancy are doing a great deal to strengthen support for such access. We hope to see the impact of these programmes soon.

Regarding adolescent pregnancy, we do see certain key determinants that need to be looked into. Principally, the close correlation between poverty, ethnicity and race, and adolescent pregnancy. The lack of proper counselling, information and sexuality education is a factor, as already mentioned, as are legal barriers to contraceptives based on age. We recommend avoiding minimum ages when talking about access to contraceptives, and introducing a mix of contraceptives that is appropriate for different situations and age groups. The use of double protection is always necessary with adolescents and, with regard to contraceptives, there is a strong case for the use of long-acting reversible contraceptive methods.

Delaying the age of sexual initiation can also contribute to reducing adolescent pregnancy, but we must not rely on this as the only strategy. What little data exists indicates a tendency at present for early sexual initiation. Again, more data is needed on this.

Focusing on these issues, which all have to do with human rights, will affect the capacity of the next generation of women to attain the autonomy they strive for.

Caring for the adolescent girl is also part and parcel of the investments in adolescents and youth needed to enable some countries in the region to take advantage of the window of opportunity that their population age structures offer for a demographic dividend.

We need to look at the 112 million adolescents (male and female) living in LAC, and ask ourselves how their health, education and participation will lead us to more productive societies.

Countries such as Haiti, El Salvador, Honduras, Guatemala, Panamá and Paraguay have a wide window of opportunity that can last until 2045; for others, such as Bolivia, Ecuador, Peru and Venezuela, the window is somewhat narrower, but still significant.

Sexual violence:

Finally, let me turn to the issue of violence, including sexual violence. As we face such enormous humanitarian catastrophes in other parts of the globe, we often forget the extremely high incidence of violence in Latin America and the Caribbean.

Approximately 33% of all homicides globally occur in the region. Homicide is one of the leading causes of death for youth, especially young men.

Special protection measures for preventing gender-based violence and protecting girls and women who are victims of violence should be part of the package of interventions for young people.

Gender equality grows in areas with greater security and where social protection systems are present. In contrast, there is often discrimination and subordination of women and girls in areas without government presence, in organized crime networks and in family groups that segregate women and impose barriers to their empowerment. In such circumstances, women are relegated to spaces of subordination associated with reproduction, child-raising and care, and have no decision-making power. They are also often subjected to sexual violence, a symptom of this subordination.

Despite the progress made in gender equality in the region, violence against women seems to be on the rise. While most homicides affect young men, femicide is growing at a faster rate.

Most femicides occur in the domestic sphere, and the perpetrator is the current or former partner in just under half of the cases. But women are also victims of femicide outside their relationships, particularly in the most violent countries.

Concluding remarks

I hope to have given a perspective that this Conference might find useful for its deliberations. Going forward, UNFPA is committed to providing the needed data disaggregation, while looking at the wider population dynamics in the region. We will continue to advance the SRHR agenda as a key enabler of women's autonomy and one of the key investments to enhance the potential of generations to come.

Adolescence and youth are crucial life stages, where young people develop many of the capabilities and skills that will enable them to have prosperous, healthy and fulfilling lives. We have an opportunity to enhance the policies aimed at this age group. By doing so we will certainly be reaping the results of investments in earlier life stages, particularly those designed for the first five years of life. We will also have a generation in better shape to deal with the challenges of ageing.

We need to ensure that adolescents have access to safe and secure schools and environments, and to information and spaces to discuss how to deal with the biological, emotional and social changes they are experiencing. This will foster the development of autonomy, healthy sexuality and positive gender relationships, which can make a difference in their development as individuals, involved community members and citizens.

Thank you.