



Statement by Dr. Nafis Sadik,
Executive Director of the United Nations Population Fund
At the African Development Forum

“Implementing the Consensus”

7 December 2000

We have had a rich and varied discussion over the last few days. Your energy and commitment offer renewed hope for our work together to defeat this newest threat to development, stability and peace in Africa.

Our first and most potent weapon against the pandemic is prevention. One powerful message from this discussion is that we need partnerships to prevent HIV/AIDS: between the international community and the affected countries; between governments and NGOs; and most importantly between women and men.

The international consensus on population and development identifies HIV prevention as part of reproductive health and rights for both men and women; the consensus encourages special attention to the needs of women and young people; and it acknowledges male responsibility, and the need for men to become full partners in prevention.

The international consensus encourages integrated reproductive health care delivery as part of the health care system, maximising available resources. UNFPA is working with all countries towards integration, and we are helping to make information and services universally accessible with counselling as well as care, and the widest possible variety options, so that choice is both full and free.

Nothing is more important than a truly national approach to HIV prevention, reflecting countries' own priorities and the full range of their cultural variety. UNFPA supports and encourages the dialogue on HIV prevention in all countries.

Successful prevention programmes recognise women's multiple vulnerability; women need protection against HIV and they need the power to protect

themselves. As your discussions have made clear, empowerment for women is not a threat to men. When women are stronger, men are stronger too. They can fight their common enemies together. Partnerships are especially needed in communities living with the stress of poverty and unemployment. Partnership can fight poverty and AIDS together.

It is especially important that reproductive health information and services reach our young people, including those who are not married. We cannot pretend that teenagers are not sexually active. The evidence is all too clear. We must acknowledge reality and prepare those around us to acknowledge it too. We must find a way of speaking about these matters, and a way of putting in place the information and the services that our young people so badly need.

We need to reform our health care services to become more responsive to young people's needs. This means the direct involvement and participation of young women and young men in the formulation of adolescent reproductive health policies and programmes, including the allocation of resources.

We must recognise that early marriage per se offers no protection against infection. Early marriage puts young women at enhanced risk, unless men are prepared to commit themselves to a completely monogamous relationship.

Gender bias is the friend of HIV infection. We must teach young men and boys from earliest childhood that women are their equals and worthy of respect. This is a basic value. Girls and women have special health needs, including reproductive health, which must be respected: fathers, brothers and husbands must understand and support them.

Can we teach young men to respect women? I believe we can. The times have never been so difficult in so many ways for our young men; but nothing will be gained by condemning them. They are also our sons and brothers. Young men want to be responsible. They want to become good husbands and fathers in their turn. We must do everything possible through better education and communication, through providing employment and building self-respect, to reach our young men and ensure that they can fulfil their potential as members of the community.

Much can be done by example, and leadership is a matter for older men to consider. They can give an example of responsibility and consideration, and we must encourage them to do so. And those we should encourage most are those in the highest positions.

Tradition and custom are very valuable in protecting our heritage and passing on valuable lessons to the young – but tradition and custom have often been perverted to suit the interest of a small group. We must renew our determination to stamp out early and forced marriage. We must put an end to relics such as

female genital mutilation, and practices such as dry sex which expose women to additional suffering and risk. These are not free choices made by women for themselves, but practices which are forced on women to suit the convenience of some individuals. They must not be allowed to survive under the protection of tradition.

A perversion of tradition is also partly to blame for the risks facing many of our young people. In traditional society, young people were introduced to their rights and responsibilities as members of the community. This was a private matter between young people and those who instructed them. Nowadays the system has largely disappeared, that sexuality and sexual responsibility is still regarded as private matter. The result is that adolescent reproductive health needs are never discussed, and our young people are suffering as a result. This must change if we are to stop the tide of HIV.

These ideas are not new or strange to Africa. In traditional societies, men and women respected each other. They worked together for the good of their families and the nations. Now we must look for ways to transfer the strength of tradition to the modern world.

Even with the strongest determination, it will not be easy for African countries to put in place all the services needed to guarantee reproductive health. In this, we look to our friends and partners in the most developed countries to come to the aid of the least developed. We have a historic opportunity: we are the richest as well as the largest generation of human beings in history. We have a choice before us – to create an unbalanced world in which AIDS, poverty and malnutrition will cripple society and condemn vast populations to a life of hopelessness; or we can share in a world of unequalled prosperity.

UNFPA has been a leader in generating international resources for these aims. We were instrumental in creating the consensus on population and reproductive health. Our co-operation with African countries has shown results, encouraging donor commitment: for example the Gates Foundation has contributed \$57 million for AIDS prevention in four countries. The UK and the Netherlands have recently announced contributions to UNFPA totalling over \$75 million to help meet the greatly increased demand for condoms and other reproductive health commodities.

We can guarantee the future for our young people, if we have the will to do so. We have many problems, but the solution is within our grasp. I hope everyone in this hall will commit themselves once more to achieving it.
