



Pacific Sub-Regional Office

[AS PREPARED FOR DELIVERY]

Launch of the 2013 State of the World Population Report:

Motherhood in Childhood: Facing the Challenge of Adolescent Pregnancy

Statement by Dr. Laurent Zessler, Director and Representative,

UNFPA Pacific Sub-Regional Office

1 November 2013, Suva

Hon. Minister for Health, Dr. Neil Sharma

Hon. Minister for Social Welfare, Women & Poverty Alleviation, Dr. Jiko Luveni

Your Excellencies, the Ambassadors and High Commissioners,

Distinguished guests,

Students,

Ladies and gentlemen.

It is indeed an honour to make my remarks following thought-provoking addresses by Minister Sharma, Minister Luveni and Ms. Turagabeci. Allow me to express our gratitude for accepting our invitation to be part of this occasion.

Every year, the United Nations Population Fund produces a report to reflect the state of world population. The 2013 report is entitled “Motherhood in Childhood: Facing the Challenge of Adolescent Pregnancy”; it reflects the fact that adolescent pregnancy has become a significant global issue of concern.

The 2013 State of World Population report features personal stories of girls who have had babies while they were still children themselves. The report sheds more light into how the girl-child continues to be a pawn in societal and other forces which create opportunities for, and increases the likelihood of their getting pregnant.

Ladies and gentlemen, every year, 7.3 million girls under 18 give birth; of this 7.3million, two million girls are 14 years old or younger. They consequently suffer the gravest long-term health and social consequences from pregnancy, including high rates of maternal death. The report places particular emphasis on girls who are 14 years or younger for, as you can imagine, they are at double the risk of maternal death and injuries like obstetric fistula.

Early pregnancy takes a toll on the girls' health, education and rights. It prevents her from realizing her potential and adversely impacts the baby. Adolescent pregnancy is about the absence of choices, it is about circumstances beyond the girl's control. This report is therefore not just about the girls who get pregnant in their adolescence but it is also about the actions of their families, communities and governments.

The report *I Am Not A Lost Cause: Young Women's Empowerment and Teenage Pregnancy in the Pacific* highlights the chorus of reactions pregnant adolescents face, and the stigma they have had to deal with. The report comments on the study of the prevalence of gender-based violence and links to adolescent pregnancy in Pacific communities.

Adolescent pregnancy is too often associated with gender inequality, poverty, sexual violence, exclusion from educational and job opportunities. Adolescent pregnancy is a much bigger challenge than it is merited to be. It has to be approached in innovative and effective ways, and the United Nations Population Fund will most certainly continue to work with governments in their response to this issue. The fundamental pillars where we can begin are: Empowering girls to determine and pursue without any barriers, a future she wants; Upholding provisions of the Bill of Rights to eliminate conditions that otherwise contribute to adolescent pregnancy; and Putting girls and boys on equal footing. The Fiji government policy of free education for primary school level provides the platform of equal opportunity for the girl-child.

Young people, especially young women and adolescent girls, hold the key to the Pacific's future: they are its tipping point but also its hope. Girls who grow up to be mothers and can decide how many children they want, or at what intervals they would have them, can change the socio-economic landscape of their countries and by extension, the region.

Pacific governments, including Fiji, recently participated in the regional Parliamentary meeting which issued the *Moana Declaration*. Governments have committed to development priorities which emphasized issues surrounding adolescent pregnancy, both at the Pacific regional level and the Asia-Pacific bloc. It is now up to us to translate these commitments into policies and norms.

Ten Pacific island countries including Fiji are all updating their knowledge base with findings of gender-based violence prevalence studies in the last few years.

Countries are at different stages but for countries like Kiribati, findings have been endorsed by governments and recommendations have become policies. In the Solomon Islands, the United Nations Population Fund is supporting the conduct of surveys in collaboration with the Fiji National University. Findings from this will inform targeted programming. UNFPA is also working with 10 countries to review their education curricula in order to integrate comprehensive sexuality education. Collectively, we can revise our mindset and create new, empowering and enabling norms.

The commitment of the United Nations Population Fund in the Pacific is clear: we want women to be empowered and recognised as equal partners to regional development efforts; we want young people to be active participants in the development of their communities and countries, we would like to see adolescents accessing sexual and reproductive health services, free of discrimination or judgment; and we want the consideration of population dynamics to be the heart of future development plans. The United Nations Population Fund will continue supporting national statistics offices to collate, analyze and utilize data effectively to inform targeted development plans that make a difference in the lives of our people.

With our partners, many of whom are represented here today, the United Nations Population Fund will continue to work towards reducing unplanned pregnancies. We know that empowered young people make informed choices and this can ensure that every pregnancy is wanted, every child-birth is safe and every young person's potential is fulfilled.

Ladies and gentlemen, in a region where youth comprise one-fifth of our total Pacific population, young people's health and development is paramount and adolescent pregnancy calls for our utmost attention and investment. It is not a lost cause – *we know* adolescent pregnancy is now an issue of global concern; *we know* it is a Pacific concern; and together *we know* what we must do.

Vinaka Vakalevu.