

Distinguished Minister for Health, Dr. Neil Sharma
Director and Representative of the United Nations Population Fund Pacific Sub-Regional Office,
Your Excellencies,
Members of the Diplomatic Corp, UN colleagues,
Distinguished guests,
Students,
Ladies and gentlemen

A very good morning to you all; I am delighted to be part of this gathering and I thank the United Nations Population Fund Pacific Sub-Regional Office for the invitation. May I echo the sentiments of my colleague in warmly welcoming Dr. Laurent Zessler to our shores and particularly to the Pacific region. Dr. Zessler, we look forward to continuing our partnership with the UNFPA Pacific office, under your leadership.

It is my pleasant task this morning to launch the report: *I am not a lost cause: Young Women's Empowerment and Teenage Pregnancy in the Pacific*. The report is provided by the United Nations Population Fund Pacific office to supplement the 2013 State of World Population report. By the end of this event, we will have two very useful and up-to-date resources on the issue of adolescent pregnancy. The 2013 State of World Population report, *Motherhood in Childhood: Addressing the challenge of adolescent pregnancy* is a global overview of the situation of adolescent pregnancies. It would be prudent for us to take stock of the available global statistics and take appropriate and timely action. The tentacles of global trends do reach us and our response has to be smart and proactive. The impact of adolescent pregnancy is eventually reflected at national level.

Ladies and gentlemen, over the last decade, adolescent fertility rates or the total births per 1000 women aged between 15 and 19 have declined in eight Pacific countries. There are however some countries like the Marshall Islands, Nauru, Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu which continue to record rates above 50. In contrast, some adolescent fertility rates among developed countries are, for example, 26 in New Zealand, 13 in Australia, 7 in France and 9 in Finland.

The correlation between a low adolescent fertility rate and a society's progress is undeniable. When a girl is allowed to remain in secondary school, she is six times less likely to marry young. The 2012 State of World Population report,

entitled *By Choice, Not by Chance*, states that globally, births by uneducated adolescent girls have increased by 7 per cent in the past decade, while births by girls with secondary or further schooling have declined by 14 per cent. We must ensure that girls and boys have equal opportunities.

The report *I am not a lost cause* discusses the link between high adolescent fertility rate and violence against women and girls. Data from gender-based violence prevalence studies in Fiji, Kiribati, Samoa, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu reveal that three to eight per cent of women interviewed had their first sexual experience before the age of 15, 23 to 50 per cent before the age of 18. The younger the women were, the more chances that it was forced. It is important that the link between violence against women and adolescent pregnancy are acknowledged. Unplanned pregnancies are not just about the absence of contraceptives. Empowerment and having autonomy over their own bodies is a critical factor for the realization of their choices.

We have heard about the integration of comprehensive and age-appropriate sexuality education into school curricula, both at primary and secondary levels, and outside these formal structures, to contribute to our efforts of addressing the threats of adolescent pregnancy. Ensuring access to and the delivery of sexual and reproductive health and rights information and services never ceases. This is complemented by the various country programmes which address underlying determinants of adolescent pregnancy. Young people for example are increasingly becoming part of decision-making processes.

In Fiji, the key issues related to sexual and reproductive health and rights to be addressed by the government, as was outlined by the Honourable Minister, Dr. Sharma during his statement at The Hague Forum, include the lack of easy access to sexual and reproductive health and rights services; the rise of adolescent pregnancy, unsafe abortion and sexually transmitted infections; the absence of or poor access of quality sexual and reproductive health services for rural-based citizens; the low participation of men in family planning and the high levels of sexually transmitted infections. The Fiji government recognizes that there is a need for increased efforts with partners like non-government organisations, faith-based organisations and communities, to accelerate our efforts in this field.

The United Nations Population Fund - Pacific Sub-Regional Office has agreed to a proposal from my ministry to support a more targeted approach of delivering sexual and reproductive health information and services across the country.

Since 2010, my ministry has been working with and has established a web of strong and diverse women's groups across the country; the groups now number one thousand three hundred and thirty nine. This is apart from the forty-one Women's Resource Centres, also across the country, which we aim to increase to 60 in 2014.

The ministry intends to make real its commitment to provide services that will empower women and young girls, that will create enabling environment within which they exist with full autonomy, while they improve their political, social, economic and health status. If we achieve that then we would have achieved one of the cornerstones of sustainable development. The women's networks therefore, particularly the resource centres, will be used for advocating and creating awareness on sexual and reproductive health and rights; we will also be reliant on the support and partnership of the Ministry of Health. We will strengthen the peer education and training programmes; we want to address gender dynamics so women become partners in sexual and reproductive health decision-making; we will intensely promote condom-use and our centres will be alternative outlets for contraceptives, like condoms; and we want the women themselves to be equipped with necessary knowledge, to boost their confidence in reaching out to the boys and men, particularly young men, in their respective communities.

Ladies and gentlemen, education and communication efforts can transform social norms and eliminate stigma that have otherwise consistently worked against our efforts to ensure quality and universal sexual and reproductive health and rights information and services, for our people. We must engage young people in the formulation, design and advocacy for improved policies to address gender and economic inequalities. These are two underlying factors which combined with other societal behaviors and culturally-justified attitudes, strip girls of their choices and capacity to make their rights, lived realities. If we can make quality and universal sexual and reproductive health and rights a reality for our adolescents, we improve the next generation's social and economic well-being. We do that right and we will be well on our way to contributing to a wholesome future for the people of this ocean of islands.

I thank you.