

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.



Artwork by Rosie James

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 per cent in 2020 following such efforts.
- > **Increase midwife-delivered interventions**, which could avert 41 per cent of maternal deaths, 39 per cent of neonatal deaths and 26 per cent 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.



Ensuring rights and choices for all

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Cover image by Nneka Jones @artyouhungry



INTERWOVEN LIVES, THREADS OF HOPE

Ending inequalities in sexual and reproductive health and rights

Thirty years ago, the world came together at the International Conference for Population and Development in Cairo and put people's sexual and reproductive health and rights at the heart of global development.



Celebrating progress

In 1994, 179 governments adopted the ICPD Programme of Action, thereby agreeing to uphold the sexual and reproductive rights of all people. This groundbreaking consensus affirmed that inclusive, sustainable development is not possible without prioritizing the individual autonomy of women and girls.

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 around a third since 2000.
- ✘ From 1990 to 2021, the number of women using modern contraception doubled.
- ✘ 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.

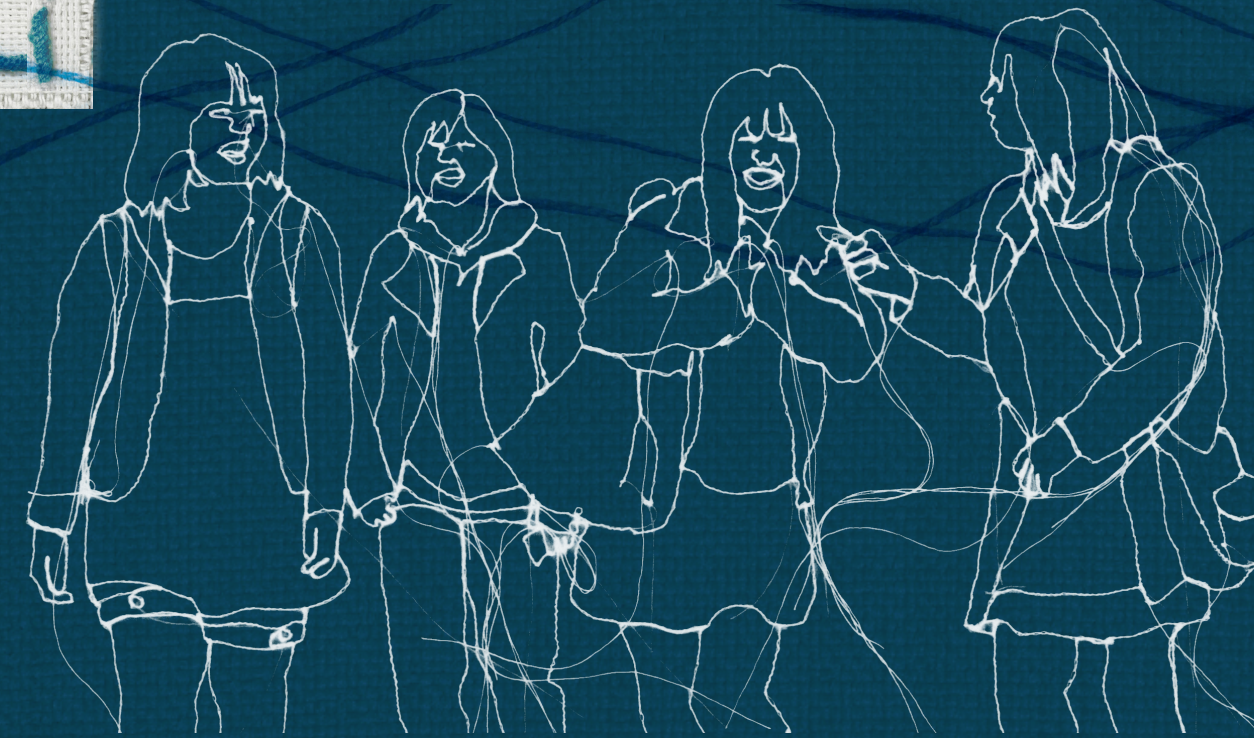
Who has been left behind?

Despite the remarkable gains witnessed over the past three decades, progress on issues such as bodily autonomy and reducing maternal death has slowed – and in some places even reversed. Millions have been excluded from progress, in part due to the multiple, compounding forms of marginalization and discrimination they confront daily.

Our global society's most privileged have been easiest to reach with advancements. Meanwhile, inequalities continue to permeate every society, depriving millions of human beings of fundamental sexual and reproductive health and rights. Many experience forms of marginalization that overlap, including gender-based discrimination and inequality.

Where is progress stalling?

- In 68 countries, a quarter of women still cannot make their own health-care decisions.
- Nearly 1 in 10 women 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.

We know that investments in gender equality and in sexual and reproductive health and rights are essential to securing a more just future. And not only that – these investments would also lead to significant economic returns. Spending another \$79 billion on family planning and maternal health, which would save 1 million women from maternal death between 2022 and 2050, would also yield about \$660 billion in economic benefits. Closing the global gender gap in the public, private and social sectors is projected to add \$12 trillion to global gross domestic product (GDP). And ending intimate partner violence, which is believed to cost the world 5 per cent of its GDP, would result in immediate and long-term benefits to productivity and earnings, with impacts cascading across generations. But the world is not sufficiently investing in empowering women or saving their lives – which suggests a shortfall of will rather than of ideas or resources.

This can be linked to the world's legacy of gender inequality, racial discrimination and misinformation, all which remain stubbornly embedded in health systems. Just look at the field of midwifery: Its largely female workforce remains severely underpaid and undermined worldwide, despite the fact that substantially increasing coverage of midwife-delivered interventions could avert 41 per cent of maternal deaths. Meanwhile, discrimination against Black and indigenous women continues to result in higher rates of obstetric violence, neglect and maternal death.

We now know that the emphasis on large-scale sexual and reproductive rights programmes, while enormously beneficial for many, has also resulted in those hardest to reach falling through the cracks. In many places, inequalities are growing, leaving the ICPD agenda unfulfilled.

