



Opening Remarks by Marcela Suazo
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at Thailand Science Research and Innovation (TSRI) Annual Seminar co-hosted with
UNFPA and National Economic and Social Development Council on
'THAI FAMILIES IN THE ERA OF LOW FERTILITY & LONGIEVITY: CHOICES AND
CHALLENGES'

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The Sukosol Bangkok

Good morning, Sawasdee Ka

- Dr. Porametee Vimolsiri. Permanent Secretary, Ministry of Social Development and Human Security
- Dr. Thossaporn Sirisumphand, Secretary General of the Office of the National Economic and Social Development Council
- Professor Dr. Suthiphan Jitpimolmard, Director of Thailand Science Research and Innovation

Honorable guests, ladies and gentlemen,

It is my great honour today to represent UNFPA for co-hosting the annual seminar with Thailand Science Research and Innovation and the Office of the National Economic and Social Development Council.

Thailand has almost reached two decades of providing universal health coverage since it was launched in 2002. The country has impressed the world tremendously for its ground-breaking commitment and great courage to entitle equity to all people in its kingdom through a health instrument even before it could reach its economic achievement as the upper middle-income country in 2011.

The scheme, indeed, does not only entitle everyone to his/her fundamental human rights, but is also the instrument to deliver tangibly the equity of all population groups in Thailand. The beauty of the UHC is its intrinsic provision of the sexual and reproductive health which leads to the continuous lower number of maternal and child deaths in past decades. This ensures women in Thailand that their pregnancy and delivery will be safe no matter who they are.



Today, it is globally recognized that fulfilling the rights of women and girls is central to development. But if one were to trace the origins of this realization, many threads would lead back to Cairo in 1994. At the International Conference on Population and Development held there 25 years ago, diverse views on human rights, population, sexual and reproductive health, gender equality and sustainable development merged into a remarkable global consensus that placed individual dignity and human rights, including the right to plan one's family, at the very heart of development. These rights rest on the recognition of the basic right of all couples and individuals to decide freely and responsibly the number, spacing and timing of their children and to have the information and means to do so, and the right to attain the highest standard of sexual and reproductive health. In the exercise of this right, they should take into account the needs of their living and future children and their responsibilities towards the community.

Thailand was among the 179 member states that adopted the ICPD 25 years ago acknowledged that these rights are essential for country development. Among the main pillars of the ICPD, a chapter about family is dedicated to ensure the human right to marriage and family is entitled to every individual. The ICPD recognizes various forms of the family existence in different social, cultural, legal and political systems and makes a firm call that the family is the basic unit of society and as such is entitled to receive comprehensive protection and support. It encourages the duty bearers both the governments and private sectors to provide policies supportive to the family formation and family development through a life-course, taking into account its plurality of forms including households headed by the single parent or facing poverty while taking care of elderly members or those with disabilities.

Nevertheless, many countries, regardless of the socio-economic nature, are experiencing the rapid demographic and socio-economic change that influence patterns of family formation, family life, family composition and structure. Traditional gender-based division of parental and domestic functions and participation in the paid labour force no longer reflect current realities and aspirations. This phenomenon is evident in Thailand.



Consider just a few of the current realities.

Thai universities now routinely yield more female than male graduates, but men still dominate the economic and political landscape, and raising children is still considered a woman's "duty".

But as more and more women enter the workforce at ever-higher levels, Thai society at large will be challenged to enable women to balance life and career in a way that maximizes their full potential. Men should be encouraged to participate much more in the care of their children and families in general.

Nowadays, there is no longer any "typical" Thai family. Years ago the "typical" family structure would include two parents, one or two grandparents, and two or three children. Today we are seeing a large variety of families, and the trend is towards more variety, not less: nuclear families of two parents and one or, less frequently, two children; couples – including same-sex couples, without children; single persons, both young and old; skipped- generation families with one or two grandparents and grandchildren. It is important to accept that this diversity is likely here to stay and indeed increase.

The public and private sectors must jointly work on making it possible to create the optimal conditions for women - and men - to achieve this.

Children also need to be taught from an early age that it's important for men and boys to participate in care-giving. Education focused on gender equality is crucial.

So is education that imparts crucial lessons about life, love and responsible choices. Comprehensive sexuality education at a young age is key if Thailand is to effectively address the crisis of teenage pregnancy. Thailand's enacted Act aimed at tackling teenage pregnancy recognizes the need for this, an encouraging step in the right direction.

Comprehensive sexuality education must also be matched with greater access to sexual and reproductive health services for young persons, to empower them with the ability to live not only with responsibility but also the dignity they deserve.



This, in turn, links to providing girls and young women the support they need to avoid marrying and bearing children too early. And if girls *do* end up having children they need to be supported to stay in school, to ensure a brighter future for themselves and their children.

Regarding the number of children being born in Thailand, we see a clear downward trend, as fertility declines due to a number of factors. But lower fertility is not necessarily something negative. With options and viable choices, individuals will be able to exercise their reproductive decision. For instance, infertility treatment could be made accessible and affordable to the couples with proper information and counselling.

If we strategize carefully, we can benefit from the opportunities this shifting landscape presents. Thailand has the opportunity to invest in a new society, where *all* citizens across the age spectrum are able to benefit from social and economic planning and policies. Thailand can also build stronger education systems for younger persons to better long-term care and sustainable pension schemes for older persons, and from strengthened investments in sound reproductive health on one hand to healthy ageing on the other.

As I mentioned, just as lower fertility is not necessarily something negative, neither is an ageing population. We must recognize that the elderly are an asset, not a burden, to the country. Already, often under very difficult circumstances, older persons are making a significant contribution to the care and nurturing of families, and particularly of those who need it the most – children who are separated from their parents.

We must find ways to recognize and capitalize on these assets, providing the older generation with the resources they need to continue to be productive. We should strengthen the role and contribution of older people to society, both at home and in the workplace – while minimizing the hardship and stress involved.

All of these investments, these choices, these strategies formulated and implemented now and in the years ahead may make the difference between creating long-lasting prosperity and well-being for Thailand -- or being stuck in a middle-income country trap with lingering socio-economic disparity.

The 2030 Agenda places great priority on overcoming inequalities and exclusions – building fairer, freer and more caring societies that include everyone, regardless of differences. But this cannot depend on individuals



and families alone. It needs the commitment of the state, backed by sufficient resources, to support individuals in all their diversity – particularly the poorest and most vulnerable – to provide a good quality of life across the spectrum, beginning at birth itself, for all.

In Thailand, people in general *are* healthier and wealthier than previous generations – but many are still left out, not able to fully exercise their right to a good quality of life.

As Thailand undergoes its significant – even dramatic - demographic transitions, it will be challenged to fulfil the aspirations and expectations of its diverse population, from young to old. With fewer numbers of children being born – an already irrefutable fact – Thailand cannot afford to lose the potential of a single one, be them rich, poor, urban, or rural. Each child, each young person must receive the best possible investments to ensure that he or she becomes an adult who will contribute his or her maximum potential to society. This would bring about lasting prosperity for Thailand as its population ages and the dependency ratio increases; it would bring political stability, as Thailand moves from middle-income to middle- class – a distinction often overlooked; it would help spread economic gains and create purchasing power; and it would help slow down the erosion of intergenerational solidarity that typically accompanies economic growth and smaller family size.

The next 20 years will be crucial to define and give shape to the aspirations of all people in Thailand, and the investments made in families are a crucial component of this. If families have the means to do so, all children – including orphaned and abandoned children, those left in the care of relatives, and even children born to migrant parents – will have access to good nutrition, schooling, health, protection, and a gender-neutral upbringing. If parents have the financial and logistical means to have careers and have children, and if women are guaranteed that childbearing and childrearing does not mean the end of a career, fertility rates may not decline further. If incentives exist for boys to stay in school, and if programmes exist to dissolve gender biases built into social norms and practices of raising boys and girls, which often fuel gender-based violence, marriage rates might go up and divorce rates might go down. The success of Thailand's family planning campaigns 40 years ago was based on the idea that it was about planning your life, not just your family. Today we have come full circle: it is about planning your family, not just



your life. In the end, it is individuals and their decisions about their productive and reproductive lives that shape families – whether to get married, whether to stay married, whether to have children and how many. It is the responsibility of all of society – government, politicians, employers, the media, community leaders and the guardians of social norms – to empower individuals to make these decisions fully exercising their human rights.

The year 2019 marks the 50th anniversary of UNFPA when it was established in 1969. Three years later, we started our programme here in Thailand. For the past 47 years of our operations, UNFPA has worked with all sectors, government, civil society, individual champions and private sector in overcoming any obstacles that keep women and girls from making their own choices and informed decisions. UNFPA stands ready to continuously support Thailand in listening to voices of all population groups especially women and girls and young persons including the excluded persons to leave no one behind.

Khob kun ka
