

## Introductory speech at the side event: “Free to Decide, Free to Choose”, Sweden and France, March 13, hr. 11.30-12.45

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Welcome to this event, on the topic “Free to Decide, Free to Choose”, in which we will discuss the important question: “How to guarantee universal access to sexual and reproductive health and rights, as an essential condition for the emancipation of women and girls?”

We are very happy to sponsor this side-event together with France.

And the event is organized by the International Planned Parenthood Federation, Planning Familial and the She Decides movement with the support of the French and Swedish Coordination of the European Women’s Lobby and the Jean Jaurès Foundation.

Thank you all for your important work to improve the conditions for women and girls across the world. And thank you for sharing your learnings and experiences on how to make sexual and reproductive health and rights accessible to all women and girls.

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So, what are we talking about if we look at some numbers? Why is this so important. Well, every day, 830 women and girls die because of pregnancy or in childbirth. Every day!

One out of five girls under the age of 18 in the world is married, and more than 200 million women and girls in developing countries lack access to contraceptives.

Every year, somewhere around 25 million women and girls go through insecure abortion, that causes almost 13 percent of all maternal mortality in the world.

Behind all these numbers there are women and girls that do not get their rights satisfied. Women and girls who suffer, who are denied living their life in freedom, who are being exposed to violence, for example honor based violence. Women and girls who might even die way too soon.

It is for these women and girls we are fighting for universal and affordable access to sexual and reproductive health and rights across the world. Our struggle is for them. For these women and girls. And their rights.

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Several decades of research have shown – and continue to show – the profound and measurable benefits of investment in sexual and reproductive health and rights.

Yet research notes that progress towards fulfilling these rights for all has been hindered because of weak political commitment, inadequate resources, persistent discrimination against women and girls, and an unwillingness to address issues related to sexuality openly and comprehensively.

As a result, almost all of the 4.3 billion people of reproductive age worldwide will have inadequate sexual and reproductive health services over the course of their lives. This is not acceptable.

Sexual and reproductive health and rights are essential. They are fundamental to people's health and survival, to economic development, and to the wellbeing of humanity.

Particularly, they are essential for girls' and women's wellbeing and empowerment. Without access to contraceptives, safe and hygienic conditions during menstruation, maternal health-care, and safe and legal abortion, women cannot live healthy or professional lives.

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Providing a comprehensive sexuality education is a profound part in ensuring accessible sexual and reproductive health and rights for everyone. If you know your rights, it is much easier asking for them to be fulfilled.

Sweden has a long history in this field. Sexuality education has been compulsory in schools since 1956 and starts at a young age. At preschool, children learn that they are entitled to decide over their own bodies.

In addition, many schools engage experts on the issue. For example, RFSU, the Swedish Association for Sexuality Education, which is part of my delegation to CSW, visits classrooms and provides comprehensive sexuality education classes with the aim of improving comprehensive sexuality education and health, overcoming prejudices and preventing violence and discrimination.

When I spoke with RFSU recently, they said that young people are eager to speak about these issues, they want to know more about love and relations, identity, sexuality and sexual orientation and how to act respectfully towards each other! I must say that this gives me hope. And we have a responsibility to reach out to young people, to provide the education that they long for and need.

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I would also like to say a few words about the #metoo-movement. That made a large impact on the public debate in Sweden, and around the world, when it burst some one and a half years ago.

At last, all these horrifying stories were told, stories that had been kept in silence for too long. We already knew the problem existed, but with the #metoo-movement it became evident to all of us just how widespread it was.

Metoo also made it very clear that the struggle against sexual harassment and for everyone's right to their own body must continue, both in Sweden and elsewhere.

And it was truly relieving to see and hear all these women and girls lifting off the burden of shame and guilt that they had carried, and placing it where it belongs – with the perpetrators. Not the victims. This was indeed revolutionary. For so long victims had been blamed, but they are not guilty. The guilt for sexual harassment belongs with the perpetrators.

In the light of this, I am proud to announce that Sweden last year passed a law, the so called Consent Act, stating the obvious – that if sex is not voluntary it is illegal. This means that sex without consent is rape, even when there are no threats or violence involved. Sex must be based on consent!

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At last, our times are troubling times. There is a cold wind blowing over parts of the world. Destructive forces are pushing to roll back many hard-winnings on gender equality. Climate change is threatening our civilization and the rights for women and girls. New voices are being raised questioning the importance of gender equality.

Therefore, it is urgent and utterly important that we stand up for the equal value of all people and for the rights of women and girls. In these times it is no longer enough to push gender equality forward, we must now also defend what has already been accomplished.

So let me be very clear: gender equality in Sweden and the world must move forward, it is not to be rolled back.

We shall not roll back the progress that women before us have fought for, we shall not push back women's rights. We must move forward. And we will continue the fight until women and men, or however you define yourself, have the same opportunities to shape society and their own lives.

Thank you!