

**Speech of DR. GITA SEN, during the public forum entitled, A Local-Global Conversation on the
Philippines' Reproductive Health Bill**

held on 16 November 2012 at the Dusit Thani Hotel, Makati City.

Dr. Gita Sen is a member of High-Level Task Force on ICPD. She has worked for 35 years nationally and internationally on population policies, reproductive and sexual health, gender equality and women's human rights, as well as issues of poverty, human development and labour markets. Her work has helped to shape the global paradigm shift on population and development. A citizen of India, Sen holds a PhD in economics from Stanford University. She is a professor of public policy at the Indian Institute of Management in Bangalore, India, and adjunct professor of global health and population at Harvard University. She is a founder and member of the Executive Committee of Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era (DAWN) – a network of feminist analysts, researchers, and advocates from the global south.

The Public Forum was sponsored by DAWN, The Forum for Family Planning and Development, Inc., Linangan ng Kababaihan (Likhaan) and the Family Planning Organization of the Philippines.

Friends,

I think this is a conversation that has needed to happen for quite some time because in a way the Philippines has been written off in the global arena on SRHR issues as a power base of the anti-SRHR forces and that one can't do anything about that. So it's really fantastic that it is changing, and hopefully, Congressman Lagman, changing really fast. I think, everyone, that we have to give a special round of applause to the Congressman and to everybody else who's really leading in this.

I'm going to make three very quick sets of remarks, so that we can go to the open discussion.

The first is, as many of you would have picked up on (as you've entered) the flyer on the creation of a High Level Task Force for ICPD. This was created by UNFPA a couple of months ago, and it's co-chaired by the former president of Mozambique, President

Chissano, and the former president of Finland, President Halonen. Its goal is to galvanize political support for sexual and reproductive health and rights, and to ensure that international development efforts prioritize investments that are needed to do so, and this includes programs and policies that promote gender equality, women's empowerment, and the health and rights of young people worldwide. So we encourage and look forward to collaborating and cooperating with friends, colleagues and partners in the Philippines in this effort.

Secondly, if one looks at the Philippines in the context of the rest of Asia, for its level of per capita GDP and its level of girls education, the Philippines could be doing much better in terms of the levels of maternal mortality, the levels of teen pregnancy, and a number of sexual and reproductive health indicators. I mean, it's a classic statistical outlier. You see, everywhere else, for most of the other countries, either women's education or per capita GDP and the sexual and reproductive health indicators cluster together nicely. And then you'll find the Philippines off somewhere by itself, and it's very clear where that is coming from - it's the absence of a systematic policy affirmation and access and availability of sexual and reproductive health and rights.

As Junice said, who is it that suffers the most as a result of this? As is the case everywhere, where reproductive and sexual health and rights are not backed up strongly legally and through policies, it's the poor and especially poor women who suffer. Those who can afford to make their own way, in whichever way they can. But those who really suffer are the poor, and it is poor women who suffer badly.

So the absence of an RH Bill in the Philippines is not only anti-life, as the Congressman said. It's also anti-equality - anti-economic equality and anti-social equality.

There was one thing though that I wasn't aware of before, and that I've learned just from your presentations today, and that is the importance of having an overarching RH law without which you're at the mercy of random administrative ups and downs. You have

experienced a bad time for RH in the recent past under a female president and that, of course, is a real irony.

But I think my final point is actually about the critical importance of the Philippines at this moment globally. I think that we're all aware, and particularly in the context of this most recent terrible case of the Indian woman who died in Ireland after being refused an abortion when she was already going through a miscarriage, that RH issues and reproductive and sexual rights issues, transcend borders at this point.

The Indian couple were probably in Ireland because the husband is part of India's IT industry, and the woman who died was a dentist. You couldn't ask for a couple who were better placed to be able to have a safe delivery, miscarriage, abortion, whatever it was. And the atrocity that this 31-year old woman was allowed to die because the doctors did not obey the law - the Irish law which says that if a woman's life is in danger, doctors can actually perform an abortion - or maybe they were confused about the law, or perhaps because they were so brainwashed by the Church, that they allowed her to continue to suffer as long as that fetal heartbeat was there. And she suffered, and finally died of a septic condition brought on by the prolonged miscarriage. That is an atrocity, but it's also a pointer that globalization makes us very quickly aware across the globe of such cases.

Globally at this point the Philippines is crucial. The Philippines at this moment, is a critical battleground because it has been seen for too many years as a stronghold of anti-SRHR forces. If these forces can hold the Philippines, they feel that this is one of their bastions. In a sense, it's crucial because in the context of ICPD @ 20, some of us believe that the Holy See sees this period as a fight to the finish.; Over these next two years, they want to smash the movement for sexual and reproductive health and rights and gender equality into the ground, globally. We see many signs of that in many places.

So to lose the Philippines would be a big loss for them. Equally therefore for us, winning the Philippines and winning the RH Bill in the Philippines is a big, big dream, not just for the Philippines, but for women and their partners the world over. It will be a big, big win.

Make no bones about that. I'm sure you're aware of that, but you need to be aware how important this is, and, therefore, how closely all of us from outside are looking at and watching what is happening in the Philippines and keeping our fingers crossed, just as we were keeping our fingers crossed during the recent US elections.

This is a globalized world, the US presidency matters, and the Philippines' RH Bill matters to all of us. We look forward to being with you, supporting you in any way that you feel we can; keeping quiet, if that's what you want us to do; speaking up, if that's what you want us to do, in whichever way you would like us to partner with you. We are here with you, and more power to you. Thank you!