

Madrid, 9th of June, 2014

*Encuentro de intergrupos parlamentarios sobre Población, Desarrollo y Salud Reproductiva "De El Cairo al post-2015: la salud y los derechos sexuales y reproductivos se juegan su futuro en 2014"*

**[Draft Speech for Mme Sabien Lahaye-Battheu, member of the Belgian All-Party Parliamentary Group 'Parliamentarians for the Millennium Development Goals']**

Mr Chairman, dear colleagues and participants,

**[Introduction]**

Let me start by thanking you for your invitation and for the opportunity to speak here today at this conference on the twentieth anniversary of the Cairo Programme of Action on Population and Development and on sexual and reproductive health and rights.

I was asked to come to speak on the role of parliamentarians in ensuring the right to sexual and reproductive health.

As one of the very reasons for conferences such as these is to share knowledge and foster political support, I would also like to take this opportunity to share with you some of the good practices on sexual and reproductive health and rights in my own country.

**[The role of Belgium in promoting SRHR domestically and in international affairs]**

Twenty years after Cairo we need to ask ourselves: can we be satisfied with the progress made? What are the gaps, barriers and bottlenecks? Where do we go from here? And more specifically, what is our role as parliamentarians in ensuring the full implementation of the Cairo Programme of Action?

I would like to recall that twenty years ago, at the international Conference on Population and Development (ICPD), world leaders agreed to invest in people and put human rights at the centre of development. At the same conference, it was recognised that sexual and reproductive rights enable people to attain the highest standards of sexual and

reproductive health, free of discrimination, coercion and violence. All these issues are imperative for women's empowerment, gender equality and sustainable development in general.

My country has always been a strong supporter of the ICPD Cairo Programme of Action.. Still today, the Cairo Programme of Action is a landmark document in our thinking on development, human rights and gender equality.

***[Role of parliaments and All-Party Parliamentary Groups]***

The strong support of my country for the ICPD Cairo Programme of Action and sexual and reproductive health and rights has been encouraged by the Belgian All-party parliamentary group I am proud to be part of. Last year, this group celebrated its tenth anniversary.

Today, we see that similar All-Party Parliamentary Groups are active in more than 100 countries worldwide to promote the implementation of the Cairo Programme of Action and to safeguard sexual and reproductive health and rights.

Thanks to the work of parliaments and these all-party parliamentary groups, there is a growing consensus that universal access to sexual and reproductive health and rights is crucial to reduce poverty and to achieve the millennium development goals.

In Belgium, our group raises political awareness on sexual and reproductive health and rights, facilitates negotiations between development stakeholders and parliamentarians, and encourages initiatives that increase access to sexual and reproductive services worldwide.

Our activities include:

- Organising public meetings in the parliament and holding parliamentary hearings.
- Coordinating parliamentary questions and debates.
- Organising meetings between group members and government ministers and officials.
- Maintaining contact with similar Parliamentary Groups worldwide.
- Facilitating study tours to low-income countries to improve understanding of sexual and reproductive health needs and services.

I received the opportunity myself to join a study tour to Swaziland in 2012. There, I was able to witness the devastating impact of HIV and AIDS on the country's development and the enormous challenges that remain in other areas of sexual and reproductive health and rights.

Witnessing the burden of HIV, the burden of maternal mortality and other health-related issues in the country, convinced me even more that high-income countries such as Spain, Belgium and others, should remain strongly committed to development aid.

We, parliamentarians and policy makers, should be fully aware that the life, health and rights of millions of people worldwide depend on decisions made in capitals such as Madrid, Brussels or London.

Despite the austerity measures in my country and budget cuts for development aid, I still believe my country is a credible partner in promoting sexual and reproductive health and rights worldwide.

Despite these budget cuts, my country substantially increased its contributions to UNFPA, an important development stakeholder for the implementation of the Cairo Programme of Action.

In addition, last year, the Belgian parliament adopted a new law on development cooperation in which sexual and reproductive health and rights, including HIV, are put forward as priorities.

At the same time, I would like to emphasise that a country's credibility on sexual and reproductive health and rights, not only depends on its international policies and development budgets.

A country which defends and promotes sexual and reproductive health and rights in the international arena, can only be credible if this policy line is also reflected in its domestic policies.

### **[Good practices on SRHR in Belgium]**

Without downplaying the challenges of my country, I believe my country has adopted the necessary domestic policies to be a credible partner in promoting sexual and reproductive health and rights worldwide.

Let me give you a couple of examples to illustrate this.

The unmet need for family planning in Belgium is very low and the prevalence of modern contraceptives is among the highest in Europe. In Belgium there is over-the-counter access to emergency contraceptives. Contraceptives for young people are fully reimbursed by the government and contraceptives for adults are partially reimbursed by health insurance companies.

In Belgium, high-quality comprehensive sexuality education is part of the school curriculum. Comprehensive sexuality education does not only focus on the prevention of sexually transmitted diseases and the prevention of unplanned pregnancies but covers a wide range of sexuality related topics, such as relationships, interpersonal skills, sexual expression, sexual health, and society and culture. As a result, my country has one of the lowest teenage pregnancies in Europe.

Belgium was the second country worldwide to allow same-sex marriage. In Belgium the rights of sexual minorities are recognised and protected by law. To do so, Belgium has an Interfederal Centre for Equal Opportunities that promotes equal opportunities and takes action against all forms of discrimination, including on the basis of disability, faith, age, gender and sexual orientation.

Let me give you a final example. In Belgium, access to safe abortion services has been regulated and reimbursed by the government since the adoption of the abortion law in 1990. I would like to emphasise that in my country the legalisation of abortion and the removal of all kinds of barriers to safe abortion services have not led to higher abortion figures. The Belgian abortion law combines strong policies and programmes aimed at the prevention of unintended pregnancies. As a result, Belgium has one of the lowest abortion figures in Europe.

In all the examples I gave, the Belgian parliament has played a key role in advancing sexual and reproductive health and rights in domestic policies.

Today at this conference I am proud to say that, despite the many political differences in my country, there seems to be a large consensus, across all parties, on sexual and reproductive health and rights, both in domestic policies as in international affairs. All political parties are convinced that every individual should be able to take free decisions on matters related to sexuality, relations and reproduction.

**[closing words]**

Mr Chairman, dear colleagues and participants,

It goes without saying Parliamentarians are central to the full implementation of the Cairo Programme of Action and to ensure sexual and reproductive health and rights will be anchored in the post-2015 development agenda.

Efforts to increase access to sexual and reproductive health and rights have, however, fallen short in many countries because of underlying economic, political and cultural constraints and ideological-driven campaigns.

Therefore, we, parliamentarians, must continue to act as spokespersons for gender equality and sexual and reproductive health and rights for all as we do here today at this conference.

Over the last 20 years we have certainly made progress. Let these positive results so far be an incentive to follow this course. I am convinced the Belgian parliament shall remain a strong and committed partner in this endeavour.

Thank you for your attention.

Sabien Lahaye-Batteau