**FRED SAI’S REMARKS**

**AT ‘AN EVENING OF CELEBRATION IN HONOUR OF PROFESSOR FRED T. SAI, GRANDFATHER OF MATERNAL HEALTH ON HIS 90TH BIRTHDAY’**

**VENUE: MOVENPICK AMBASSADOR HOTEL**

**DATE: 27TH JUNE 2014**

**Thank you all for your very kind words. It is such an honour for me to see so many of the faces I have worked with over the past years in the audience. Your presence here touches me profoundly.**

**And Prof Fathalla, thank you so much, not only for your well-considered analysis of the unacceptable circumstance that girls and women of Africa continue to face, your glowing references to our work together, and your consistent commitment to our mutual cause; but also for our long standing friendship. Additionally, I must acknowledge the extreme honour your presence in Ghana brings to this occasion. In these our latter years, I know from experience that it is more than a little taxing to leave the home hearth and travel even the smallest of distances.**

Tonight, I am happy to celebrate two milestones with you: my 90th birthday; and a half century of work to advance women’s empowerment and reproductive health and rights.

Mahmoud, you and all the kind speakers are right about the passion and commitment that drives me. It drives us both. It drives many of the people here. Empowering women, educating the girl child, ensuring that women control their reproductive choices is the right thing to do. This is the only way women can take their rightful place in economic and social development. And it has such an impact on the health of families and on national and international development. We know that when a woman can choose the number and spacing of her children, she can take charge of her life—completing her education, seizing opportunity, lifting herself and her children from poverty.

We know that reproductive health is a cornerstone of public health. Indeed, if all women who need it had access to family planning and reproductive health services, we could prevent 79,000maternal deaths and more than 1 million infant deaths each year. And, because family planning leads to lower birthrates, it saves money that our nations can invest in health care, infrastructure, and job creation.

You are right, my commitment was seeded in my youth, growing up among an unusual number of girls and women. It has been supported and nurtured by my wonderful wife Florence and illuminated as I have watched my beautiful daughters grow, shouldering their own trials and celebrating their successes. Now their children radiate the strength, the courage, and the commitment to their roles at home, in the community, and on the national and international stage.

I am proud of the progress that we have made in the field. It is definitely a better world in which to be a woman.

But improving access to family planning and reproductive health is not all that we must do for the women of Ghana and Africa. It is the least we can do for those who have given and endured so much. There are major battles still to be fought. Domestic violence, trafficking of girls and women, and child marriage are all calling for more action.

As I leave the public arena I hope I can count on you, the next generation of standard bearers, to address some of the gaps that greatly concern me.

Ghana remains one of the most progressive countries in terms of its legal framework around SRHR. We worked hard to achieve this. But there is more to be done. Women and girls need to know they can legally access safe abortions. They need to know where they can access services. We need to make sure they are educated about their bodies, their options, and supported in their efforts to control their child bearing. We, as activists and as reproductive health proponents must ensure that our laws are promulgated and implemented in their entirety.

To paraphrase my friend Nafis Sadik, our law in Ghana makes it less difficult for our woman ‘to make a choice between a pregnancy they cannot continue and an unavoidable abortion.’ Let us make sure that every woman knows this. Let our communities, doctors, and lawyers understand and help girls and women appreciate this.

Let me add my concern about a factor that I have been less vocal about. I have heard about and watched with anger, frustration, and disappointment increasing numbers of children grow up without their fathers. Male impunity for pregnancy and child up-bringing magnifies the burden so many girls and women are shouldering in navigating the maze of social judgment that frowns on the woman having a child out of wedlock and castigates the woman without children.

We need a societal response that supports the woman and the child. Can the extended families and communities ensure that men, young and mature, who impregnate women are not allowed to avoid the responsibility of prenatal support? Can we as a society ensure that men have to support their children once they are born?

Without better-informed and supportive men, women will continue to make decisions out of fear. Their life path will be derailed because they could not find the funds to support the decision to terminate or to continue a pregnancy. Men will continue to flourish with no reflection on their social status and free from any consequences from the abandonment of their responsibility. As my learned friend pointed out, I have seen my share of lost lives as a result of desperation. Until men acknowledge their role and their responsibility in this process, the unnecessary suffering of women will continue.

We need a movement. We require an assertive community response. As families we need to make it impossible for our men and our boys to skirt their responsibility. As a country we need a more effective legal framework with a clear implementation and enforcement plan to compel shared responsibility for our children and their mothers.

As Mahmoud said tellingly many years ago, women are suffering and dying from pregnancy related causes not because of the lack of knowledge and technology but because of the lack of the political will to save them. Non-supportive social structures, traditional and even religious practices that continue to discriminate and stigmatise our women should all be engaged by our movement.

All of us in this room agree that women’s lives matter. Let us reach beyond ourselves to create a wave of proclamation. Let us have a social movement that brings Africa and the world at large together, acknowledging that girls and women are the key to sustainable global development, peace, and security; declaring that girls and women really do matter!

I thank you!