

Helen Clark Keynote Address
Lives in the Balance: A COVID-19 Summit for the Health and Well-being
of Women, Children and Adolescents

Thank you, Mercy, and to Dr Tedros and Narjes for your powerful opening words.

To all the women who have raised their voices and articulated what they want and need – as we just saw in the opening video – we hear you.

And to all of you beaming in from around the world – let me extend a warm welcome and hello from Auckland, New Zealand.

The world recently hit a grim milestone – over 500,000 COVID-19 deaths worldwide. And yet we know this is just the tip of the iceberg. This public health crisis has become a full-blown social and economic crisis.

Last week, the International Monetary Fund predicted that the world economy would shrink by 4.9 per cent in 2020 – a dip whose only parallel in the last century is the Great Depression.

The Great Depression was devastating. But in parts of the world, including in my own country, it was the catalyst for creating demand for and then for the delivery of a new social contract between governments and their people, and the establishment of comprehensive social protection and universal health coverage.

Many years from now, when people look back to the pandemic of 2020, how will this episode be remembered? What kind of era will it have ushered in?

That, I believe, is up to all of us to determine. And, as we know, lives are in the balance.

I hope that the lessons learned from this pandemic will be a catalyst for social policy change in three key ways:

One. Let this be the moment when we tackle the unacceptable inequities in our societies. To do that, governments need to adapt, extend, and scale-up social protection programmes such as cash transfers, food assistance, social insurance and child benefit schemes.

Ultimately, we should aim for a world with universal social protection which offers a shield against future shocks. We know that this is not the last pandemic that we will face, and the climate crisis also looms large.

Two. Let this be the turning point for achieving universal health coverage. We must be relentless in our drive to build resilient health systems that provide accessible, high quality services to all.

Let us begin by massively scaling up investment in public health, and in primary health services which are the closest to where people live and are very important to women, children and young people.

And three. Let this time be a watershed moment for embarking on truly inclusive policy debate and decision-making.

This Summit – above all – is about solutions. Finding those must begin with women, children, and adolescents, and with all who have been marginalized whose voices often go unheard.

It is a simple, yet profound idea: at this time of crisis, we must ask those who use health services what they most need. We need to amplify their voices. We need to use our platforms to influence leaders. And we need to upend our decision-making processes so that they are truly inclusive of all voices.

The Partnership for Maternal, Newborn & Child Health, whose Board I am proud to chair, has over 1,000 partners with a reach across almost all countries on earth. Drawing on voices and lived experiences from around the globe, our Partnership is coming together to call on governments, with one unified voice, for urgent action to mitigate the devastating effects of the pandemic on the health and well-being of women, children, and adolescents.

We've developed a Call to Action, which I'm honoured to share with you today. Dr. Tedros – thank you for WHO's steadfast support for this call, and let it serve as a rallying cry for others to join us.

We're calling for the protection of investments in sexual, reproductive, maternal, newborn, child and adolescent health services.

We're calling on governments to strengthen efforts to advance sexual and reproductive health and rights and gender equality.

We're calling for quality, respectful and dignified care.

We're calling for better support and protection for the health workforce, notably nurses and midwives.

We're calling for social protection nets for all.

We're calling for functional, safe and clean water and sanitation facilities.

And we're calling for scaled up prevention of violence against women, children and adolescents, which has spiked during the pandemic.

These seven demands are straightforward and reflect basic human rights. Yet they remain unmet. And during these turbulent times, with systems and resources strained, they can easily get lost in the noise.

And so here today – in this defining moment – we are also calling for leadership, action and hope for a world in crisis.