Introductory remarks

Your Excellency, First Lady of Senegal,
Your Excellency, Minister of Health,
Your Excellency, Executive Director of the United Nations Population Fund,
The Honorable Ambassador of the US,
The Honorable Kenyan Minister of Planning Development,
The Honorable Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for International Development Your Excellency First Lady of Burkina Faso
Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a great honor and pleasure to be here in Senegal to participate in this landmark international conference on Family Planning. My name is Monica Kerrigan and I serve as the Deputy Director and Team Leader for Family Planning at the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.

This international conference in Dakar represents a significant milestone and ground breaking moment, not only for Senegal but for women, men and young people around the world. Why is this meeting so important now? Just last month, global population reached 7 billion and rapid population growth in the poorest countries is preventing strong economic, health and social development.

Sub Saharan Africa continues to have the highest maternal and infant mortality, high fertility rates, highest unmet need for family planning and lowest contraceptive use. Almost one third of Africans live in francophone Africa, and this has been one of the most neglected regions of the world for family planning and maternal and infant health. This is the first international conference in family planning that is taking place in French speaking West Africa and we applaud the leadership of the Ministry of Health of Senegal, Gates Institute and the planning committee for your hard work in preparing for this conference.

We have the opportunity to use this conference to act boldly as a global community to make family planning an urgent priority on the global, regional and country agendas. This conference can be catalytic and accelerate the spread of new ideas, approaches and interventions. But, we have to examine how to adopt new behaviors and strategies to accelerate change with urgency, vision and innovation.

Senegal has served as one of the premiere countries for training of medical, midwifery, nursing students and faculty throughout the region and is a leader in business, trade and commerce. It is a country that is on the move—making progress on many fronts and has the opportunity to be catalytic in fostering innovation in family planning.

Last week, our leadership at the foundation met to share their vision and priorities for the future. Melinda Gates identified family planning as her urgent and top priority for 2012 and beyond. She believes strongly that family planning saves lives and will create a better future for women, children, families and nations.

Melinda has seen the inequities caused by poverty, lack of government commitment, spousal opposition, stock outs, and policy barriers the prevent women from accessing effective contraceptive methods. She is committed to making family planning an urgent priority and she is keenly interested in partnering with governments, donors, private sector and civil society to make significant change.

I am honored to introduce to you, Melinda French Gates, co-chair of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and a deeply committed leader and advocate for family planning.