

Speech

Opening Remarks

The Fourth Meeting of the First Ladies and Women Leaders Coalition of Latin America on Women and AIDS

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Speech by
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Excellencies, First Ladies of Latin America and the Caribbean, Distinguished Guests, Friends and colleagues,

It is a great pleasure and privilege to be here in the Dominican Republic with you at this unique meeting of the Coalition of Latin American First Ladies and Women Leaders on Women and AIDS. Unique – because the Coalition continues its historic partnership with women living with HIV; unique because for the first time the Coalition of First Ladies and Women Leaders in Latin America is meeting with the newly created Caribbean Coalition on Women, Girls and AIDS to look at common issues, build regional synergies and build a powerful alliance to ensure the best possible AIDS response for women and girls.

Warm thanks to you, Doctora Margarita Cedeno de Fernandez, First Lady of the Dominican Republic, for generously hosting this gathering. I know how extremely engaged you are on a range of social issues in your country, in particular access to services for the vulnerable – and how engaged you are in the Coalition – thank you for your leadership. This is my first ever visit to the Dominican Republic and it is an honor to be in your beautiful country.

I would also like to pay tribute to the dynamic leadership of Dona Xiomara Castro de Zelaya, Your tireless efforts, Dona Xiomara, to bring new perspectives and partners to the response to AIDS in Latin America is, I know, deeply appreciated by so many and an example for the world.

And to you Señora Patricia Perez, profound thanks for your tireless and courageous leadership for the community of women living with HIV and involvement in the response in the region and the world.

If there is one thing we know for certain about the response to AIDS – it is the importance of leadership. You all exemplify this leadership and the power of it in leading the world to a better place in its response to AIDS.

And we are at a critical moment in the global response to the epidemic. 2008 is also the year for review of progress towards achieving Universal Access to HIV

prevention, treatment, care and support. The review will be held in the General Assembly in New York in June and I urge your support in ensuring highest possible level of representation from your respective countries.

A quick glance of where we are today with the response shows results and also critical challenges. 3 million people in low and middle income countries are taking anti-retroviral treatment up from 230,000 in 2001. There are unprecedented resources available for the response. We know some countries are well on the way to Universal Access. Yet we also know that for every two persons on treatment another five become infected. In this very region we still see a disproportionate number of young women testing positive. And so as leaders we must ensure that we reinvigorate all dimensions of the prevention agenda and continue our very specific focus on the disproportionate impact that this epidemic continues to have on women and girls.

This means investing new energy in tackling the tough issues that lie at the core of AIDS including stigma and discrimination that stops many people from accessing testing and treatment.

It means tackling the issue of gender inequality once and for all.

It means reaching those most at risk and the most vulnerable.

It means ensuring the human rights of women and people living with HIV are fully and always respected.

It means ensuring those, who understand HIV and AIDS the best, people living with HIV, are fully involved in tackling the challenges we face.

It means engaging these challenges and turning them into opportunities to make Universal Access a reality

We are all gathered here, because you have chosen to address these issues, to speak out and to act. Thank you all for your exceptional leadership.

I know we will have a truly inspiring dialogue over the next two days.

Muchas Gracias.