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General Assembly

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By Women, For Women

Your Excellency Azeb Mesfin, First Lady of Ethiopia and OAFLA Chair, honorable First Ladies of Africa,, distinguished MPs and ministers, and esteemed colleagues:

I am honored to be with you today. I am grateful to Her Excellency Mrs. Janet Museveni, the First Lady of Uganda, for hosting this session of the General Assembly of the Organization of African First Ladies against AIDS in Kampala.

I would also like to commend Her Excellency Mrs. Wzro Azeb Mesfin, First Lady of Ethiopia, for her commitment and dedication to the fight against HIV and for the key role she has played in the development of the OAFLA strategic plan, the financial manual and the institutional structure for the Organization's Secretariat.

A gateway to family health

The continuing work you do in your countries, and your strong, trustworthy voices, have been catalytic in saving the lives of babies and their mothers by bringing the prevention of mother-to-child transmission to your people. It is a beautiful example of action by women, for women.

Starting life HIV-free is a human right. In 2010, 420,000 babies will be born with HIV. Do they not have rights? Because we have the means to stop this tragedy, we must act.

PMTCT is a good investment. For every dollar spent preventing HIV among children, we save thousands more in treatment avoided.

And PMTCT saves mothers' lives too. There is more at stake than saving infants. Women who give birth must also survive.

Experience shows that eliminating vertical transmission is possible even in the most challenged communities. As you may know, Botswana, Namibia and Swaziland, with some of the world's highest HIV prevalence rates, have already surpassed 2010 universal access goals by putting more than 80% of pregnant HIV-positive women on ARV. Other African countries are making wonderful progress too.

Getting PMTCT to pregnant women is so important because it is a gateway for prevention, treatment, care and support services for the whole family. It links sero-discordant couples to counselling. It leads to HIV testing for older siblings. It is a platform for connecting families with other maternal, child, reproductive and sexual health services.

To reach our goal of virtual transmission, we need to do several things: Reduce infections among women by 50%. Ensure that all HIV-infected pregnant women receive ARVs. And meet the family planning needs of HIV-infected women.

Maternal health is a woman's right

Last week, at the International AIDS Conference in Vienna, I announced our new vision of where we are going with the AIDS response. We will accept nothing but **Zero new HIV infections. Zero discrimination. Zero AIDS-related deaths.**

But we will never get to zero if maternal and child health—and the rights of women—are not given special consideration in what we do.

We must provide women with better tools to protect themselves from HIV—such as microbicides and female condoms. They must have the rights, the skills and the power to negotiate their own sexuality. And they must feel safe from violence.

I am happy to see that the African Heads of State here at the AU Summit are deliberating on the theme of maternal and child health. The AIDS response can not be separated from the work being done to improve the health of mothers and children. Millennium Development Goals 4, 5 and 6 are interwoven with many threads and are indivisible.

HIV has been an obstacle to improving maternal health and reducing child mortality. It is the leading cause of death for women of reproductive age. And 850,000 women die every year from AIDS-related causes.

In these times of austerity, bringing the AIDS response and maternal health and rights together will increase efficiency and deliver value for money.

The timing has never been better

The winds of change are with us now to push for greater integration of AIDS with maternal and child health. The health of women and children is on at the top of world leaders' agendas now, including that of the United Nations Secretary-General, Ban Ki-moon, who launched the Joint Action Plan for Women's and Children's Health this year.

And during the latest G8 summit, leaders also adopted a global consensus on maternal health, which recommends that countries support free services for women and children.

All of these commitments, combined with our joint efforts, are producing results that we need to build on. Our foundation is solid, thanks to remarkable progress countries have made. Child and maternal mortality has been declining over the past two decades, and global spending on maternal, newborn and child health has increased significantly.

The First Ladies' continuous, strong leadership to save mothers and unborn children has played a key role in building this momentum in Africa. Your "Save the Unborn Child" campaign invigorated countries to push harder to reduce child mortality, and I have no doubt that your new campaign will become a reference point for many advocates for maternal and child health. I am grateful that you have focused your interventions on an area that is such a major concern for us at UNAIDS.

We are committed to working closely with your esteemed organization towards the wellbeing of our mothers and babies. I also hope I can count on your strong advocacy for the removal of all punitive laws and discriminatory practices against people living with HIV and those who are most at risk. Stigma, discrimination and criminalization threaten universal access by creating universal obstacles to those who need our help most.

Your Excellencies, our dear First Ladies, let us all stand alongside to encourage our governments, communities, women's groups and the AIDS movement in their tireless efforts to stop mothers from dying and babies from becoming infected with HIV.

Rest assured that the UN family, including UNAIDS, UNFPA, WHO, UNICEF and others, are committed to work hand in hand with your Excellencies for a sustained and strengthened Permanent Secretariat in Addis Ababa.

I am pleased to announce today that PEPFAR and UNAIDS are granting US\$300,000 to the Organization of African First Ladies Against AIDS to help support your efforts to develop

regional and national activities to promote PMTCT and to address barriers to scale-up of essential services as a means to eliminate pediatric AIDS.

More women will be supported as they access essential care during and after their pregnancies, helping them attain good health for themselves and their families.

An AIDS-free generation is so close. I am confident we can achieve the virtual elimination of mother-to-child transmission by 2015, in every country, for every family.

Thank you.

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Leveraging the AIDS response, UNAIDS works to build political action and to promote the rights all of people for better results for global health and development. Globally, it sets policy and is the source of HIV-related data. In countries, UNAIDS brings together the resources of the UNAIDS Secretariat and 10 UN system organizations for coordinated and accountable efforts to unite the world against AIDS.
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