

## SPEECH

**By: Michel Sidibé, Executive Director of UNAIDS**

**Date:** 18 October 2010

**Place:** City Hall, Monrovia, Liberia

**Occasion:** Launch of the Agenda for Accelerating Country Action on Women, Girls, Gender Equality and HIV

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### **Precious gems**

I am grateful to be here today, and for all the hard work of everyone who made this mission happen. I want to thank Her Excellence the President of Liberia; the Honourable Gayflor Vabah, Minister of Gender and Development; and Dr. Ivan Camanor, National AIDS Commission Executive Director.

Thank you to my colleagues in the UN Team on AIDS under the leadership of Ms. Ellen Margrethe LøJ, and most especially, to the Network of People Living with HIV in Liberia.

I congratulate Liberia for embracing this Agenda. For recognizing and supporting the most valuable of your natural resources—the women and girls of Liberia.

Like your diamonds, they are precious. And like diamonds, they are unbelievably strong. They are the solid centre of human life—of families, of communities, of care—the places where AIDS is most effectively challenged. And like Liberia's diamonds, they bring pride to this country, and they deserve to be free.

It is saddening and infuriating to see women and girls, these treasures, tainted or exploited. Violence, rape and gender inequality take away their power and their choices.

Where women are abused, devalued or discriminated against, society suffers and HIV flourishes.

While HIV prevalence here is relatively low, at 1.7%, it is rising at a frightening rate. Other African countries are reducing their burdens, but Liberia's is getting heavier each day.

Women and girls make up 58% of people living with HIV in Liberia. Young women aged 15-24 are especially vulnerable—their prevalence rates are three times higher than men their age.

One reason is the very high incidence of rape among women, and particularly young girls—a tragically common affliction of countries recovering from years of civil war. We see it in the DRC. We see it here. But I believe your country can overcome this by taking serious action right now.

### **Unmatched opportunity**

**UNAIDS' vision: Zero discrimination. Zero new HIV infections. Zero AIDS-related deaths.**

The Agenda is coming at an important time for Liberia, as you rebuild your country after a long period of conflict and uncertainty. You need strong, safe women and healthy families to do this. You need a solid AIDS response. You need a human rights revival.

This moment of renewal is a shining opportunity to put women, girls and HIV at the centre of your reconstructed health and social systems.

The Agenda gives you a practical roadmap for doing this. It focuses on empowering women and girls against violence, gender inequality and HIV, to not only equip them with the knowledge and confidence to protect themselves, but to take their rightful, equal places as advocates, leaders and policymakers, like their President, driving change in their communities and countries.

This Agenda is different from any such plan you have ever seen. Why? Because it uses the strategies and synergies of the AIDS response to identify and address the key issues women and girls face.

First, it has grown from the solid foundation of UNAIDS' Action Framework on Women, Girls, Gender Equality and HIV, and offers actionable recommendations that will get results.

Second, it engages civil society—including women's organisations and alliances of men and boys concerned with gender. Their dynamic participation is a cornerstone of the Agenda, and ensures that everything we do is grounded in the real-life experiences of women and girls.

Women and girls living with HIV/AIDS, their families, and groups of people most at risk must also be involved in creating and implementing the country's AIDS response, and the agenda explains how to tap this powerful resource most effectively. I have seen it over and over: people living with HIV can ignite a social movement that demands strong political support, increased financing, improved accountability and better, more tailored responses. Their voices carry the most convincing call to end stigma and discrimination.

Third, the Agenda is rooted in a human rights approach, uniting the equal treatment of women and girls with the global AIDS response in ways that ensure good health, economic security, strong families and a culture of mutual respect between men and women.

Fourth, it is strong on accountability and contains time-bound, measureable deliverables, with reporting back on progress to our Board.

Finally, it recognizes that the AIDS response is not just a health response. It spans the whole spectrum of development and human rights, including and especially the Millennium Development Goals. This is the "AIDS plus MDGs" approach UNAIDS is strongly advocating.

### **AIDS + MDGs = healthy women and girls**

By taking AIDS out of isolation and leveraging its synergies, strategies and resources, we can holistically address a range of concerns that affect women and girls.

- When we provide universal education and fight poverty, we make girls less vulnerable to exploitation and the desperate, risky choices that increase their danger of HIV infection.

- When we empower women and girls with HIV knowledge and prevention, we enable them to take control over their own sexual and reproductive lives to protect themselves.
- When we prevent and treat HIV, we decrease maternal mortality.
- When a mother's life is saved, her children are better protected. And preventing mother to-child transmission fosters a generation of children born HIV-free.

I want to stress that AIDS plus MDGs is not an abstract notion dreamed up behind the walls of the UN. It is a practical, holistic approach to development carried out at the community level. When people are sick, they want to get well. They do not divide health care up into artificial slices like MCH, SRHR, HIV, TB, etc. They want to go to their local clinic and see a health worker who can help them with anything.

I urge you, as you rebuild your health systems, to use the power of integration to end the ugly scourge of gender violence. Look for ways to bridge the AIDS response with sexual and gender-based violence programmes, making both HIV and SGBV a central component of sexual and reproductive health services.

### **Implement—and start changing lives**

I know everyone here is looking forward to President Sirleaf signing the Model Law and the NAC Acts. I urge your government to honour this legislation by backing them with predictable, sufficient funding for implementation.

You will be in good company. By the end of next year, at least 25 countries will have included three or more actions from the Agenda in their national strategic plans, with appropriate budgets to carry them out.

I ask you to be among them. Follow up this launch with a sincere, high-level commitment to implement this plan. I truly believe it will change lives—of women, and girls, but also of men and boys.

Communities will thrive and prosper in good health. Babies will be born HIV-free. Families will have their mothers, daughters and sisters to love.

And across Liberia, the landscape will glitter with diamonds—strong healthy, women and girls.

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### **Contact**

UNAIDS Geneva | Saya Oka | tel. +41 22 791 2511 | [okas@unaids.org](mailto:okas@unaids.org)

### **UNAIDS**

UNAIDS, the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS, is an innovative United Nations partnership that leads and inspires the world in achieving universal access to HIV prevention, treatment, care and support. Learn more at [unaids.org](http://unaids.org).