

# A HOLISTIC APPROACH: WOMEN'S AND GIRLS' HEALTH NEEDS

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## SPEECH

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

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### **Women's and girls' health needs a holistic approach**

It is an honour and privilege to be here with you. I want to thank President Zuma of South Africa and the African Union, especially its chairperson, Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma, for her personal commitment.

A few weeks ago, we were in Abuja talking about AIDS, TB and malaria. Today we are in Johannesburg talking about women's health. One thing is clear to all of us today: Health is not about expenditure; it is about investment. And women's health is one of the most essential and rewarding investments we can make, because it supports peace, stability and development.

My friends, we are here to talk about one issue, and about one dream—to save the lives of women and children on our Continent. We cannot do things the same old ways. We need to reflect on how we can shift the paradigm away from the obsolete disease approach and toward a truly holistic approach.

We cannot afford to have a woman coming into a health-care facility for TB screening one day, then going somewhere else for HIV services on another day, and seeking other types of care at different times and places. We need to consider that a woman is not a collection of health conditions or needs, but a whole human being who requires holistic support to thrive.

AIDS continues to complicate and set back our progress on the Continent. Twenty-five percent of maternal deaths in Africa are due to HIV. Just in 2010, sixty-four per cent of maternal deaths in Botswana are due to HIV. We need to take AIDS out of isolation; We need to look at it holistically.

African women living with HIV are eight times more likely to die in pregnancy than women who are HIV negative. And women living with HIV are at higher risk of getting cervical cancer.

Our concern is not just for women—we are also talking about children and babies. We are failing in our efforts to bring HIV medicines to African children who need them. The UNAIDS 2013 Global Plan Report shows that 34% of children in 21 priority countries in Africa are not receiving the HIV treatment they need. This is tragic, because we know that most babies

born with HIV who do not receive treatment will certainly die—50% before their second birthdays.

We need to push for better integration of services. Women and children must have the opportunity to access a “one-stop shop” for their health needs and medicines. The issue is also technical. We need innovation and interventions that will save lives of women and children.

But countries must also consider the political economics of maternal and child mortality, and factors that are placing babies and mothers at risk even before conception period. Issues of inequity must be addressed through social justice and the redistribution of opportunities. We must not only limit our interventions to pregnancy—it is a lifelong process that begins with young girls. We must address their health needs—including sexuality and preventing gender violence—early, before pregnancy happens. Similarly, we should not wait to address issues of early pregnancy and unsafe abortions, we should not wait until women are already HIV-positive to start to act.

This is what I believe Africa needs:

First, we need innovation. We must democratize technology and reach poor people where they are.

Second, we need a community-based approach. We need to move away from expensive delivery mechanisms and reengineer a public health delivery approach.

Third, we need integration. We must create linkages between and among all of the systems that work to improve the lives of women and girls.

Finally, we need men. We must engage husbands, fathers, brothers and sons if we are to save the lives of women and children.

Thank you.

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## **UNAIDS**

The Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS) leads and inspires the world to achieve its shared vision of zero new HIV infections, zero discrimination and zero AIDS-related deaths. UNAIDS unites the efforts of 11 UN organizations—UNHCR, UNICEF, WFP, UNDP, UNFPA, UNODC, UN Women, ILO, UNESCO, WHO and the World Bank—and works closely with global and national partners to maximize results for the AIDS response. Learn more at [unaids.org](http://unaids.org) and connect with us on Facebook and Twitter.