

UNAIDS EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR REMARKS

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**EDUCATION
PLUS
INITIATIVE**

Education Plus Initiative High-level side event

“Making Education Investment Cases Work for Gender Equality and HIV Prevention”

Excellencies, distinguished delegates, women leaders, representatives of civil society, UN colleagues, ladies and gentlemen, welcome. Thank you for coming to this important breakfast.

I am a firm believer that health is a human right and that education is a fast-track to health and rights.

Today, we face a crisis for adolescent girls and young women, especially in sub-Saharan Africa. In 2022, a girl or young woman in this region was newly infected with HIV every three minutes, amounting to 3100 new infections every week. Adolescent girls and young women here account for more than three-quarters of new infections among 15 to 24-year-olds.

Each of these new HIV infections is preventable. And keeping girls in school is a critical element of HIV prevention. We have the evidence to show that when a girl completes secondary education, her risk of HIV infection is reduced by up to 50%. Yet millions of girls on the continent do not have the opportunity to complete secondary education. We must take immediate action to change this situation—get our girls in school and ensure they complete secondary education. This requires that commitments made by African member states—to address gender inequalities and to address the stigma and discrimination that fuel HIV infections—are fulfilled.

There is progress in Africa, but it simply isn't fast enough. That is why we have Education Plus, an initiative co-led by five UN agencies: UNAIDS, UNICEF, represented today by its executive director, Catherine Russell; UN Women, represented by its Deputy Executive Director, Nyaradzayi Gumbonzvanda; UNFPA and UNESCO.

Together with the African Union, we support 15 African heads of state who are already championing and implementing Education Plus in their countries: Benin, Botswana, Cameroon, Eswatini, Gabon, Gambia, Kenya, Lesotho, Malawi, Senegal, Sierra Leone, South Africa, Tanzania, Uganda and Zambia. Together with donors, civil society, girls' movements, and the UN, these governments are putting in place the right policies and working to step up their investments to guarantee free secondary education for all children, boys and girls. They are creating violence-free school environments, providing sexuality education that is appropriate and enabling access to sexual and reproductive health through services that are appropriate, close by and friendly to young people. They are bringing together the different sectors needed for success: education, health, social protection and finance. And they are introducing effective school to work transition programs for girls, so that girls can avoid transactional sex and be empowered to earn their own money through developing marketable skills.

The aim of today's session is to galvanize decision-makers from governments, key stakeholders and development partners to scale up investments; put in place policies and actions on education; and pull together multi-sectoral interventions that will prevent HIV infection in girls and young women. This will achieve other outcomes as well. When girls complete secondary education, you also reduce teenage pregnancy, early marriage and sexual violence. You empower girls to have healthy families. And you grow the economy. The social and economic benefits of preventing HIV are huge and go way beyond preventing HIV.

This week, the 68th session of the Commission on the Status of Women begins. This year's theme focuses on addressing poverty and financing for gender equality. It is critical that during the CSW the world recommits to preventing and responding to HIV in adolescent girls and young women, particularly in Africa. We need to close the inequalities for girls by paying attention to economic issues, social protection, access to services, gender-based violence and harmful social cultural practices. And we must guarantee education, which is a key pathway to preventing HIV in girls.

I want to offer a warm welcome to our distinguished speakers, in particular those who will share with us this morning how their countries are working to ensure that every single African girl completes secondary school safe, strong and empowered.

Thank you.



