

UNAIDS EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR REMARKS

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UNAIDS | 2025



16 FEBRUARY 2025, ADDIS ABABA, ETHIOPIA

29TH ORDINARY GENERAL ASSEMBLY OF THE ORGANIZATION OF AFRICAN FIRST LADIES
FOR DEVELOPMENT



Building on Beijing: First Ladies Championing Women's Leadership and Rights Through African Heritage

Her Excellency Mrs Sustjie Mbumba, First Lady of the Republic of Namibia and outgoing President of OAFLAD,

Her Excellency Mrs. Denise Nyakeru Tshisekedi, First Lady of the Democratic Republic of Congo, Outgoing Vice President of OAFLAD,

Her Excellency, our champion, Mrs Fatima Maada Bio, First Lady of the Republic of Sierra Leone, Incoming President of OAFLAD,

Your Excellency, Dr Ana Dias Lourenço, First Lady of Angola,

Incoming Vice President of OAFLAD,

Our host, Your Excellency Madam Zinash Tayachew, First Lady of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia,

Your Excellency, Amb. Minata Samaté Cessouma, Commissioner for Health, Humanitarian Affairs and Social Development, African Union Commission,

My sister, Professor Senait Fisseha, Vice President, International Programs, Susan Thompson Buffett Foundation,

All of you, your Excellencies, First Ladies present here, all protocols observed.

I am truly honoured to join you, as we commemorate and build on the legacy of leadership and rights secured at the Beijing World Conference on Women thirty years ago.

Thirty years ago, the historic Beijing Women's conference, I was fortunate to be there stood amongst the courageous women who called on governments to entrench gender equality in law and in practice.

The incredible contributions of former First Ladies such as Nana Rawlings of Ghana and Susan Mubarak of Egypt during that conference, cannot be ignored.

African women were on the frontline, championing and defending the rights of African women and girls. Her Excellency Netumbo Ndaitwah, my sister, President-elect of Namibia, played a central role as lead negotiator of the Africa Group. And didn't she do a great job, ensuring that the critical area of the girl child was included in the Declaration. I remember there was a big debate over it, with other regions saying, 'Why do you want to include the girl child? In every critical area, we have put women and girls into the full cycle of life, from birth to death. Why do you want a special one for the girl child?' African women fought hard to make the case. For us, a woman's chance in life is wiped away early in life as a girl. If we don't start there, the rights of women will not be won.

Then the question of keeping our girls in primary school, staying up to the end, became an important one. Ten years after Beijing, we started to see the numbers equalising, boys and girls entering and completing primary school. Universal primary education, that was our victory.

Today, our struggle is for free quality secondary education for our girls

Because 34 million girls in sub-Saharan Africa are out of secondary school. And where do you think they are?

They are out there trying to help their mothers, in markets trading, raising goats—in environments that are predominantly male, that are not safe for them, where they are not getting empowered, but where their security is at risk.

We know the consequences when girls can't finish secondary school: higher risks of sexual violence, early marriage, unwanted pregnancy, complications in pregnancy and childbirth, and HIV infection.

Every week on our continent here, 3100 girls are newly infected with HIV. Their lives will change forever. They are three times more likely to be infected with HIV than boys of the same age. So it's a big issue for our girls.

But, if all the girls were to be in a secondary school, and to complete secondary school, their risk of pregnancy could be cut by 75%. In other words, that school is the safest place for our girls to avoid infection from HIV, to be protected from sexual violence and many other social issues. And when they stay in secondary school, whenever they go to work, their potential income increases by up to 25%. So, they are also getting better able to lead a better life.

So, these gains not only help girls themselves, but they also grow economies. We have the data—the GDPs of countries are boosted by 10% on average when girls complete secondary school. We are the world's youngest continent. If we harness our demographic dividend for *everyone*—including opening opportunities for girls and young women, Africa could gain another US\$ 500 billion *every year*.

That is why I am so proud that I am working with 5 other women leaders of the UN, leading an initiative called Education Plus. Together with Natalia Kanem from UNFPA, Catherine Russell from UNICEF, Sima Bahous from UN Women, and Audrey Azoulay from UNESCO, we are working together with the African Union, with African governments, with civil society organizations, with girls and young women on the ground, to secure a better future for our girls, by:

- Putting in place the policies and investments that are needed to ensure free secondary education;
- Building violence-free environments in those schools;
- Providing life skills and age-appropriate sexual and reproductive health services; and
- Supporting girls' economic empowerment through school-to-work transitions.



I pay special tribute to you First Ladies in this room, who have launched and are part of this initiative called Education Plus in your countries¹. Let's keep going!

Global Alliance to end AIDS in Children

Excellencies, First Ladies, this is an issue that is close to all of our hearts, I know, because so many of you have been working on it—because it is a tragedy and it is a moral outrage. You have been working on it, through OAFLAD's Free to Shine initiative.

Every single new HIV infection in a baby or a child is a failure on our part as African adults, African mothers and African fathers, because we have everything we need to stop vertical transmission of HIV. Yet there were over 100 thousand new HIV infections in children in Africa in 2023.

Children make up 3% of people living with HIV, but they also account for 12% of all AIDS-related deaths. They are not getting the treatment they need to stay alive. We are leaving children behind. Globally, 77% of adults living with HIV are on treatment but less than 60% of children living with HIV are. A child dies of an AIDS-related disease—a disease that is both preventable and treatable—every 8 minutes. This is a moral outrage that we need to change.

We have made some progress. We have averted an estimated 4 million infections among children since 2000. But we know what works, and we know we can stop it forever.

That's why we created the Global Alliance to end AIDS in Children. And we have 12 countries,² those with the highest burden of children living with HIV, and we are supporting them with our sister agencies WHO, UNICEF, us UNAIDS, and civil society.

We are looking forward to our next meeting of this Alliance, where we are trying to accelerate, we have plans, and we are moving to meet every two years to assess progress, to share stories, and to drive harder. The next Ministerial meeting for this Global Alliance will be held in Geneva on the sidelines of the World Health Assembly, where all the Ministers of Health come. We want you First Ladies from the members of the Global Alliance also to be there to make your commitments, to share your reports on progress in your countries, and to demonstrate your leadership on how you can support those efforts. This meeting of the 12 Ministers will be hosted by the Government of the Federal Republic of Nigeria. I have been discussing with my sister, the First Lady of the Republic of Nigeria, encouraging her to host this convening of the First Ladies at that time.

I want to make you aware of another meeting that is very important where your voice could be useful, that is the ICASA meeting. There is a bi-annual meeting of the whole HIV movement—all the ministers, civil society, the scientists, the companies—we all meet. And this time we are meeting in Accra, Ghana in December. It's a very important meeting for networking, but also for sharing innovations, good practices, and policies, and so on.

¹ Benin, Botswana, Cameroon, eSwatini, Gabon, Gambia, Kenya, Lesotho, Malawi, Senegal, Sierra Leone, South Africa, Tanzania, Uganda, Zambia.

² Angola, Cameroon, Côte d'Ivoire, The Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Kenya, Mozambique, Nigeria, South Africa, Tanzania, Uganda, Zambia, and Zimbabwe.

We have this disruption of one government that has removed its support, but that is the moment when we need to come together, to see how are we stepping in to keep the response going. So that's an important meeting, First Ladies, consider being there. Consider coming, and we can discuss with the First Lady of Ghana, perhaps, to be the one to host such a meeting. I put it to you, this could be an opportunity for your leadership.

In conclusion, Excellencies, First Ladies. You are all accomplished women. You are powerful. We are in a tough environment, one with major policy shifts and increased competition for limited resources. We must support civil society organizations, making them a strong voice for women's demands.

I want to work with you and will be right behind you.

Thank you for your leadership.

