

# UNAIDS EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR REMARKS

WINNIE BYANYIMA

---

UNAIDS | 2025



4 DECEMBER 2025, THE DOME, PRESIDENTIAL VILLA, ACCRA, GHANA  
LEADERSHIP OF AFRICAN FIRST LADIES IN THE RESPONSE TO HIV AND AIDS: ENDING AIDS  
IN CHILDREN AND MOTHERS BY 2030







Thank you, First Lady, Madam Fatima Bio, President of OAFLAD.

Our gracious host, Madam Lordina Mahama, First Lady of the Republic of Ghana.

Excellencies, First Ladies present here.

Dr David Paranetwa, my brother, the President of the Society of AIDS in Africa.

Distinguished ladies and gentlemen, good morning.

I am honoured to speak on a subject that is deeply personal to me.

Girls' health, their education, their rights, and the transformation that these bring, not just to the girls themselves, but for their families, for their communities, and for their nations.

First, let me salute you, First Ladies of Africa, for launching your OAFLAD Strategic Framework for 2025–2030. This bold vision advances the rights of girls and women across our continent through four strategic pillars: health, education, addressing gender-based violence, and women's economic empowerment. It's so simple and clear and powerful. These pillars reflect your unwavering commitment to tackling the most pressing challenges facing our girls and our young women.

Today, I stand before you to remind us of the unbearable price that girls and young women pay when laws, when policies, when harmful norms treat their bodies as battlegrounds, denying them their sexual reproductive health and rights. This is not just a series of gaps or service delivery challenges. It is a systematic, structural denial of human rights—one that is often imposed from outside rather than from in our countries.

Every week, 4000 girls and young women aged between the age of 15 and 24, acquire HIV worldwide. Out of those, 3300 of those girls and young women are here, are African, on our continent. Women and girls account for 63% of new infections in our region. These infections are entirely preventable. At the same time, teenage pregnancy remains shockingly high. One in four girls gives birth before the age of 18 in sub-Saharan Africa. In Kenya, 660 teenage pregnancies occur every single day. In South Africa, the number reaches 90 000 annually—teenage pregnancies, child pregnancies.

These pregnancies do not happen in a vacuum. They happen when girls are married off as children. When they are denied contraception and sexuality education, appropriate sexuality education, when they are punished for being sexually active, even when that activity is sexual violence, unwanted.

Child marriage rates are highest in Western Central Africa, where one in three young women is married before the age of 18. Poverty, harmful norms, weak laws, pushed girls into unions they did not choose, pregnancies they did not plan, and risks they did not consent to. When a 15-year-old is married to a man twice her age, that's not culture. It is sanctioned, sexual violence, with a marriage certificate.

And when these pregnancies are unwanted, the law often turns its back. In Sub-Saharan Africa, 77% of abortions are unsafe, causing 15 000 preventable deaths every year—many more, as there is a lot of undercounting here.

These are not complications. They are policy manufactured deaths. Our policies create them.

But there is hope. In Zimbabwe and Malawi, a high court has ruled that denying abortion to survivors of marital rape and girls under 18 is unconstitutional because the law itself denied their trauma and their rights.

Across Africa, millions of girls need contraception but cannot get it. More than half of girls aged between 15 and 19 who want to avoid pregnancy are currently not using contraception. They can't access it.

Why?

Because of laws requiring parental consent, stigma from health workers, and service closures when funding is cut. If a girl is 16, and she's not in school, and you

send her to the market to work like an adult, how do you expect her not to become sexually active? You've thrown her into the adult world. And when she encounters unwanted sex and does not have protection, what do you expect? We place our children in those conditions. We make laws and policies that create gaps for them.

For girls, policy looks like this: a pregnancy she never wanted. A forced marriage. A secret, unsafe abortion, and sometimes a funeral.

Beyond hospital bills, these barriers steal the education, future income, and leadership of our girls. Over 6 million pregnant and parenting girls are out of school in sub-Saharan Africa. Many never return because of punitive policies, because of stigma, because of lack of childhood. Every girl pushed out of school by pregnancy, by HIV, by early marriage, is a future doctor, is a future minister, is an activist we have decided we can live without.

What must change?

Sexual reproductive health is a human right, not a privilege, not a favour. The good news is that some countries are advancing human rights. In Rwanda, for example, adolescents can now access sexual reproductive services without parental consent from the age of 15, empowering young people to protect their health and keep themselves safe. Just a month ago, President Joseph Nyuma Boakai of Liberia submitted a bill to ban female genital mutilation to the legislature. Congratulations! We applaud this move and encourage all countries to take steps to criminalize FGM to protect the rights of girls and young women.

For adolescent girls and women, three non-negotiables must guide us:

**One: guarantee universal access to sexual reproductive health services.**

- Align laws with human rights and the evidence.
- Remove age and marital status barriers to HIV services, to contraception, and to safe abortion.
- Invest in youth-friendly, confidential services where girls are treated with dignity and not judged.
- Services, health services, are about health, period.
- Not judgments.

**Two: deliver comprehensive sexuality education, that is appropriate.**

- Teach consent, bodily autonomy, gender equality, and digital safety in classrooms, online, and in communities.
- Knowledge is power.
- Knowledge is life.

**Three: protect the right to learn.**

- Enforce pregnancy-inclusive education policies.
- Congratulations, First Lady, Madam Bio, for your firm stand on radical inclusion. Providing childcare, social protection, and flexible pathways back to school. Pregnancy should not be the end of a future. It should be a second chance to a future.
- We know this. When girls stay in school, when they live free from violence, when they control their fertility, HIV infections fall, maternal deaths decline, and economies grow.

And let us be clear. Human rights, sexual and reproductive health and rights are not a Western idea. They are an African necessity. They are rooted in our values of Ubuntu—I am, because we are. Let us not allow global ideological movements to use our continent. The bodies and lives of our girls must not be battlefields for other politics playing out.

Let us stand for our children. Let us make it legally, politically and financially impossible to deny our girls and our young women their sexual productive health and rights. They are theirs at birth.

Thank you so much.



