

Speech

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OAFLA Extra-Ordinary General Assembly

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**Speech by
Elizabeth Mataka
UN SG Special Envoy on AIDS in Africa**

Her Excellency, First Lady of Ethiopia, Ms Azeb Mesfin;

Her Excellency, the First Lady of Zambia, Mrs Maureen Mwanawasa, Acting President of the OAFLA;

Their Excellencies, the First Ladies of Africa and members of OAFLA;

Honourable Minister of Health, the Honourable Dr Tedros Adhanom;

Deputy Director, UNAIDS, Ms Debbie Landey;

Distinguished panelists,

Dear friends,

Thank you, your Excellency Mrs Mwanawasa, thank you Honourable First Ladies of Africa for giving me the privilege to speak at this important occasion.

Thank you Debbie for your inspiring words.

It has been seven months since the UN Secretary General appointed me UN Special Envoy for AIDS in Africa and a little longer since I was elected Vice Chair of the Board of the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria. Since then, perhaps even more so than before, I have witnessed the magnitude of this epidemic and the overwhelming, indelible, impact of its touch on our continent. The number of people infected daily in our region is difficult to comprehend as are the numbers of AIDS deaths which have changed the way we organize our families and communities and how we care for our young.

As Debbie just mentioned in her remarks, 22.5 million people are living with HIV in sub-Saharan Africa and 1.7 million people were newly infected last year in Sub Saharan Africa alone. But the magnitude of this epidemic is not just seen in terms of numbers of infections and deaths - it is also evident in the vibrancy and energy of the response to AIDS and the mobilization of communities in response to the challenges of this pandemic. This year, for the first time, we can see the first emerging real signs of evidence that our efforts are starting to have a positive impact in preventing more infections and ensuring people living with HIV lead longer, healthy and productive lives.

I am honoured to have received your invitation to participate in this Extra Ordinary General Assembly as all of us in this room have a crucial role to play when it comes to addressing the magnitude of this epidemic. Of course we must continue to address it by ensuring the world fully appreciates the impact of HIV and AIDS on our continent but we must also increasingly focus on what has been achieved so far so that we can scale-up our efforts - and we must also keep our focus on the possible - on what can be done. Each of us here today has considerable influence and we have a duty and a responsibility to lend our support, advocacy and leadership to build on the extraordinary response that has so far been mobilized, a response of considerable magnitude that needs to be increased and sustained if we are to build on these first positive signs of impact. It is our duty to focus on the possible.

If we look closely at the numbers we see that the effort of every single one of us working on the AIDS response is reflected in the statistics - the number of new infections in Sub Saharan Africa has fallen, in many countries HIV prevalence is starting to stabilize or decline and importantly there is progress - far too slow for many but progress nevertheless - on access to treatment.

At this stage of the response to AIDS we must guard against any sense of complacency setting in - we are still a long way from having the appropriate systems, leadership and resources on the ground needed to secure universal access to prevention, care and treatment. The fact is that AIDS is going to be with us for generations to come and much, much more remains to be done to turn this epidemic around. The first measures of progress offer a source of hope from which our determination to continue to respond to HIV and AIDS can be strengthened, and our vigor renewed. We can not allow any sense of complacency to permeate our efforts in halting the spread of this epidemic. We need to sustain the momentum, and for that I want to focus on leadership.

Honourable First Ladies, the Organization of African First Ladies Against AIDS is an example of leadership that can inspire and influence change. It is also a unique example and opportunity – you, the First Ladies, continue to unite Africa around the response to AIDS. As First Ladies, your role as advocates in this response is vital. Therefore, I urge you to accept the pledge offered by UNAIDS and I would like to offer my assistance to you in developing your next strategic plan.

There has been measurable progress at the leadership level in Africa from which inspiration can be drawn. Under the auspices of the African Union, African leadership came together around the AIDS response and developed the Abuja Declaration around which our national responses have been built.

As a result of this a number of countries have allocated 15% of their national budgets towards health and HIV; and national AIDS responses in many countries are now led by heads of state and heads of government.

However, we all know that national resources will not necessarily cover all needs. This is where donor agencies including the Global Fund are vital to supporting national responses that have been developed and owned in country. The Global Fund has recognized that the combined worldwide need to fight AIDS, TB and malaria, including prevention, care and support services, is \$31 billion a year. But, despite the progress made to date, we are still far from meeting that need. This is not always because the money is not there. The Global Fund Board has committed to disbursing 6 to 10 billion dollars a year for worldwide programs. So why is the money promised not disbursed? In my view, one of the main problems is that the Country Coordinating Mechanisms, set up in each country as a partnership between government and civil society to develop proposals, are not requesting funding that will cover all gaps in the national strategic plans. Some continue to ignore certain elements of the population that need to be reached. In the last round almost \$5 billion worth of funding requests were received by the Global Fund but only \$2.1 billion - less than half - met the criteria for funding and could be approved by the Board. Technical support mobilized through UNAIDS and others can help ensure that proposals meet the needs of both the national response and the funding agencies.

An effective national response to the AIDS epidemic needs to address the characteristics of the epidemic. In order to be effective countries need to know their epidemic and leadership needs to ensure resources and programmes reach all communities in need or at greater risk. On that note, I draw your attention to emerging evidence from UNAIDS and others that shows an increase in HIV transmission within communities of injecting drug users and sexual minorities in Africa. Honourable First Leaders I know that working in and with these communities can present a number of challenges, especially to more conservative

communities, and yet work with them we must if we are committed to tackling AIDS. We need to be bold in our leadership and ensure that we confront even the most difficult aspects of addressing this epidemic with courage and openness.

An area that needs ongoing and increased focus in Africa is addressing the vulnerability to HIV infection experienced by women and girls. This issue has emerged as one of my areas of priority both as the UN Special Envoy and as Vice Chair of the Global Fund Board. The most recent data released by UNAIDS at the end of last year showed that 61% of HIV infected adults in sub-Saharan Africa are women. And it is on this point that I find, at times, a profound sense of disappointment. Why is it when it comes to women we are so slow to act? We can change legislation and policy, but we know that nothing will change for women unless we change our cultural practices and personal attitudes. And so, Honourable First Ladies, I ask you to join me in working towards changing those practices and attitudes that are harmful to us.

And on this point, I would like to commend OAFLA for initiating the 'Save The Unborn Child First Ladies' Campaign. This is an important example of effective leadership prioritization based on sound evidence. This initiative, Honourable First Ladies, resonates with me greatly. It is inexplicable that there has been little progress in preventing the transmission of HIV from parent to child. It is a critical intervention in the AIDS response, and that is why your campaign is a very important one. But prevention of transmission from parent to child is only one element of the response to meet the needs of women and girls. We need to educate not only our girls, but also our boys and men about appropriate models of masculinity and their responsibilities when it comes to HIV. We need more income generating programs that empower women in the home and in the field and in the workplace. We need programs that address the hardships caused by domestic violence and the connection to HIV infections.

I have raised this issue at the Global Fund Board and the organization is now directing countries to take particular note of the vulnerabilities of women and girls in the fight against AIDS through a request for proposals in Round 8 and beyond that address gender issues in particular.

First Ladies, the most immediate task you can take on after leaving this meeting is to use your tremendous influence in ensuring that all countries of Africa develop proposals for the Global Fund in Round 8 that cover all of your needs for fighting AIDS, as well as TB and malaria, and in particular those that target women and girls.

Finally, First Ladies, I urge you to continue your work in the spirit of partnership - and particularly in partnership with civil society and people living with HIV. Having worked in civil society in Zambia for over 25 years, I can tell you from experience that including NGOs, community based groups and groups of people living with HIV in every stage of the development and implementation of your country's disease fighting programs is essential for robust national responses.

In conclusion, Honourable First Ladies I would like to commend you, again, for your tireless efforts. Your leadership has inspired many and made a real difference in the response to the epidemic in Africa. I am in no doubt that your leadership has saved lives. With a renewed focus on the magnitude of mobilization and scale-up needed to tackle this epidemic and through focusing on the possible, we will save many more.

Thank you.