

First Lady's Remarks
at the
First WHO Africa Health Forum
Special Event on
Adolescent Health

Kigali, 28 June 2017

**Honourable Ministers,
Regional Directors Of WHO/African Regional Office
and UNFPA Eastern and Southern Africa,
Members of Diplomatic Corps and Head of
International
organizations,
Representatives of government and civil society
institutions,
Ladies and Gentlemen,**

Good afternoon.

Allow me to start by expressing how honoured I am to be part of this important session today, as we come together, as members of government and civil society to advance the question of adolescent health, as one key component of equity and universal health coverage.

Indeed, this special event for the promotion of our adolescents' health, towards the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals, allows us to reflect on how much we can do, how much we must do, to capitalize on the remaining 13 years we have left, to meet this SDG 3.

Distinguished audience,

Allow me to take a moment here, to also add my voice to that of my fellow Rwandan people, to warmly welcome you, distinguished guests and participants, to this first WHO Africa Health Forum. We hope your stay in our beloved country will be a pleasant one, and will encourage you to come back, to discover more.

Today's special event, allows us to learn more about the adolescent health flagship programme, which will be used to monitor the impact on health development in the region, by the African Regional Office of the WHO, through adequate mainstreaming, within national adolescent health priorities.

This first Africa Health Forum therefore provides us with another valuable opportunity as citizens of Africa, a continent with such a large youth demographic group, to respond to the pressing call to never cease exploring new ideas and approaches, to improve the health of our youth.

Indeed, we know the urgency of the situation on the ground. We need to establish well-performing systems, which rely on strong institutions with well-trained

personnel, in order to help counter a variety of challenges, including increasing access to reliable health information and education for healthier lifestyles.

As we are all aware, putting in place mechanisms promoting, and securing the holistic wellbeing of our youth, is vital if we want them to fulfil their potential and see them grow into thriving members of society, and future leaders.

Honourable Ladies and Gentlemen,

The health of all Rwandans is a priority, to us all.

For the past years, Rwandan health initiatives have been building on the milestones achieved over the years, thanks to the Government's commitment to fulfil key health targets, such as:

- the strengthening of universal health coverage, currently nearing 85% of the population;
- and, meeting all the three health-related Millenium Development Goals, namely MDG 4, for reducing child mortality, MDG 5 for increasing maternal health, and MDG 6, for combatting HIV/AIDS, Malaria and other diseases.

To promote healthy living, Rwanda used innovative methods to help the different members of our communities exercise their right to access health services, while providing alternatives to match their current situations and needs.

These methods include the support of peer educators, who are volunteers who play such a crucial role in increasing access to sexual and reproductive health information for all, while also contributing to the prevention and treatment efforts of HIV/AIDS.

But also, the use of a network of 45,000 trained Community Health Workers, who are registered through the Ministry of Health, and provide primary care to support health institutions, by counselling members at the community level, to seek the right medical treatment, in a timely manner.

In accordance with key global and regional initiatives, the Government adopted adolescent focused policies and the national twelve-year basic education for all, with the integration last year, of the Comprehensive Sexual and Reproductive Education in school curriculums. Indeed, this new comprehensive curriculum allows us to reach an even higher number of young people, with life-saving information, while empowering teachers through

trainings, in how to include its related topics in general studies.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is with the same spirit of finding solutions concerning health issues, that my foundation, the Imbuto Foundation, has aligned with government priorities, and has put at the core of its mission the promotion of a healthy population. As such, the Foundation has continuously placed at its forefront, the health of our people, with a special focus on our youth, by implementing innovative health programmes for more than 15 years.

For instance, last year, Imbuto partnered with UNFPA and UKAid, to launch the *Innovation Accelerator* project, which challenged young people to find sustainable business-driven solutions, to sexual reproductive health issues they saw in their communities.

Projects such as this *iAccelerator*, is relevant to our current realities, as it empowered our young people to take charge of their own health, by feeling responsible for finding creative youth-friendly solutions for issues, with such great impact on their future.

The past years have also been a time to focus on the holistic development of 10 to 12 year-old girls living in rural areas, through the programme called 12+.

This nationwide health programme, which is coordinated through the Ministry of Health, with the support of DFID, is implemented by Imbuto Foundation in 10 districts, and focuses on empowering these young girls with educational and health information pertinent to that critical pre-teenage years.

Through weekly mentorship sessions held in ‘safe spaces’, these young girls interact with a young mentor who discusses with them about their sexual reproductive health, developing a culture of savings, entrepreneurship and the importance of completing one’s education.

Our health programmes targeting our young population also heavily rely on involving parents and the community, through Parent Adolescent Communication forums, which teach families to talk more openly about these sensitive topics, with the support of a clearly-explained manual.

Distinguished guests,

Allow me to also share another approach realised together with the support of my Sisters through the Organisation of African First Ladies Against HIV/AIDS (OAFLA). In 2016, the continental All-In campaign, initiated by OAFLA, in partnership with the Ministry of Health, was launched in Rwanda.

This campaign was created to address the HIV/AIDS epidemic among the youth, with programmes that aim at the elimination of mother-to-child transmission (EMTCT) of the virus, but also fighting stigma, and dismantling stereotypes associated with this disease.

Through the All-In Campaign, we also saw the youth playing an active role in preserving their well-being, by taking full advantage of activities such as voluntary counselling and testing (VCT), and voluntary medical male circumcision (VMMC), in an effort to reduce new HIV infections among adolescents by the year 2020, and end the AIDS epidemic for all, by 2030.

It is our hope that through time, such campaigns will further contribute to increased awareness and community mobilisation, to help our youth continue to

make better-informed decisions, for the sake of their health, and that of the future generations.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

As I conclude my remarks, I would like to take this opportunity to thank once more all those who have contributed to the realisation of this special WHO event, highlighting once more the importance of advancing the question of Adolescent Health, while emphasizing the power of public and private partnerships to achieve the Sustainable Development Goal 3, for good health and well-being.

This occasion is a true evidence that if we all join hands, we can overcome health and developmental challenges affecting our countries, our continent and beyond.

Let us continue to empower our younger generations by opening up to them about the lessons we learned over the years, but also by making sure they continue benefiting from what we did not have growing up. Whether it be an education system that includes comprehensive sexual and reproductive health

information; the implementation of efficient, and intuitive youth-friendly services via health institutions; but most importantly, by overcoming our uneasiness towards some aspect of our adolescents' health, because ultimately, we owe it to them to give them all the tools they need, to fully thrive.

I thank you for your kind attention and wish us all fruitful discussions.