

- **Excellencies First Ladies**
- **Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen**

It is a pleasure to be here at our first OAFLA meeting this year. I look forward to working with my sisters from across our continent, and our partners, to further our goals to be the collective voice, for Africa's most vulnerable people, women and children infected and affected by HIV and AIDS.

Although we are making significant strides against HIV/AIDS, we cannot relent until we reach zero infections. Among the most vulnerable populations are women and children, exposed to violence and abuse, and unable to protect themselves against infection.

We are all familiar with the statistics on Gender Based Violence, and they tell a depressing story of violations, crime, and a threat to development around the world.

But we need not be discouraged, because with the right focus and concerted partnerships, we can make the world safer for women and girls, and ensure violence is no longer a barrier to full participation in our continent's pursuit of progress and prosperity.

Twenty years ago, Rwanda experienced the worst forms of violence, during the Genocide against the Tutsi, including the systematic rape of women and girls, as a weapon of war.

Today, peace and security form a solid foundation for continued development, and Rwanda's social fabric has, for the most part, been restored. However, we continue to deal with the consequences of that legacy.

Based on purposeful political will at the highest level, Rwanda has established a strong policy, legal and institutional framework, as well as a set of measures to prevent and eradicate gender-based violence.

Allow me to share Rwanda's experience with the "**Isange One Stop Center**", a model that is proving useful, in responding to Gender Based Violence.

"Isange", which in Kinyarwanda can be translated as "feel at home", was initiated in 2009 by the Imbuto Foundation and partners, to synergise existing but scattered efforts, in order to support victims of violence in a more holistic manner.

Specifically, the Isange One Stop Center is located in an existing hospital, with trained personnel in each of the relevant areas of

expertise, including social workers, medical doctors, lawyers, mental health workers and judicial police officers.

Once a victim or survivor is received at Isange, they benefit from free emergency contraception, HIV prophylaxis, STI prevention, and other medications, as preparations for the case investigation begin.

This multi-sectoral and interdisciplinary model provides psychosocial, medical, judicial and legal services, to victims of gender based violence and child abuse, occurring in the family, or in the community at large, **all in one place.**

This also enables the collection of evidence, acceptable by courts of law, and contributes to achieving justice.

Today, with the support of the Development Partners, we have embarked on a national scale up of the Isange model, in health facilities across the country.

Currently, there are twelve centers operating across Rwanda in District Hospitals. By the end of this year, we expect to have a total of twenty-nine centers to cover all Districts, followed by further decentralization of the service to the community.

Through quality services and sustained community awareness raising, Isange has promoted the resilience of victims and their families while preventing future violence and abuse.

It has also increased the level of collaboration among service providers and national institutions, including committed partners Rwanda Police and Armed Forces, thus enhancing rational

management of resources, effective service delivery and accountability.

Thanks to the commitment of stakeholders, the Isange model has become a national and regional learning center, earning a United Nations Public Service Award, for gender responsive service delivery in 2012.

A similar multi-sectoral approach has been used to eliminate child marriage in Rwanda. Since 2011, the legal minimum age for marriage, for both boys and girls, is 21. This law provides protection for children, especially girls, from early marriages.

In addition, the constitution stipulates that every child has the right to education, which ensures that children can access information on their rights, and do not miss on opportunities for a better life.

Relevant institutions, including the National Children's Commission and the Gender Monitoring Office, in collaboration with the community, enforce this legislation.

The immediate protection of children is essential, but so too is addressing the underlying factors that perpetuate violence, gender inequality, and injustice.

We must therefore continue to rectify the low status of women and girls around the world that renders them undervalued and vulnerable.

One way to do this is to engage, educate and empower girls. In the work that we do at Imbuto Foundation, we have learned that it is never too early to start.

Imbuto's 12+ Program equips ten to twelve-year old girls, with health, economic and social tools, using young women mentors. The program uses an innovative approach to deliver empowerment, with an emphasis on communications, mentoring, and use of safe spaces.

The aim is to support the girls to make smart decisions about their future, as they enter adolescence.

Let me conclude with a quote, from a committed fighter for women's empowerment, a "**HeForShe** Champion" – Rwanda's President Kagame, who just last week said:

*"Men – don't be an obstacle to women's well-being. There are no losers when women advance, everyone benefits."*

I look forward to continue working together, to contribute to the welfare of African girls and women. And to ensuring families are healthy, safe and able to participate meaningfully in our shared journey to development.

**I thank you.**