

Opening Speech
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HIV and Gender Norms, Alcohol and Gender-Based Violence Workshop
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Development
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Honorable Ministers, Excellencies, distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen,

First of all on behalf of H.E. Dr. Tedros Adhanom, the Minister of Health and on my own behalf, please allow me to welcome you all to Ethiopia. It is a great honor and privilege to be here with you at the opening ceremony of this meeting organized just 35 days earlier to our millennium celebration. This gathering is prepared to look in depth into an issue of paramount importance our world is facing today – HIV/AIDS, but more specifically, underlying social factors that continue to drive HIV transmission and inhibit care, support and treatment.

In the next three days together, the practicum will focus on three major factors among others that exacerbate spread of the pandemic namely alcohol abuse, gender norms and gender-based violence. Thus this workshop comes at no better time, as new HIV infections and AIDS deaths in Africa are on the rise, yet few communication programs in the region adequately address the risky behaviors, barriers to services and poor adherence to antiretroviral therapy.

It is therefore very encouraging to see such a forum being organized where practitioners come together to address these issues, share their practical experiences and insights, and come up with needed concrete strategies on the way forward. On behalf of the government I would like

to use this opportunity to thank once again AfriComNet for organizing this important workshop and bringing diverse category of practitioners and advocates of HIV/AIDS together to address the HIV pandemic in Africa and also for choosing Ethiopia to host such an important event.

HIV/AIDS, as we all know, is causing a serious social and economic damage in our world. This burden is magnified in the Sub-Saharan Africa which is very tragic and unacceptable. AIDS is unique in human history in its rapid spread, extent and the depth of its impact. Fundamentally, this crisis is not about numbers; it is about human suffering and our failure to prevent this human catastrophe from unfolding. When we see at the factors that contribute to the epidemic there could be a lot but the effects of alcohol abuse, gender norms and gender-based violence have had significant impact on HIV prevention, care and treatment efforts. Hence serious thoughts and collective efforts are required to ensure that HIV/AIDS communication programs are designed in such a way that they address these issues. It is my hope that a few years from now we will not yet again say that we should have done this, that or the other. That will not help the millions of people, especially women, who are infected and affected by this epidemic and who cannot be here with us today but expect a lot from us.

In many settings individuals, including very young people, have easy access to alcohol. Some studies have proved the link of alcohol consumption to high-risk behavior leading to sexually transmitted infections and HIV transmission. Heavy drinking often results in unprotected casual sex, poor condom use, and unprotected sex with multiple partners. Alcohol consumption has been proved to also reduce adherence to drug regimens, contributes to poor response to HIV therapy, and generally accelerates HIV disease progression.

The other concern is the unique vulnerability of women. Over the years, the proportion of females infected with HIV worldwide grew increasingly so that today nearly 50 percent of adults living with HIV globally are women and more than half in Africa. Women, especially young girls

between the ages of 15 and 24, are affected by the AIDS epidemic in unique ways because of longstanding gender inequalities and multiple vulnerabilities. Research conducted over the past two decades shows that there are four fundamental root causes namely economic vulnerability, violence against women, the persistent gender gap between boys and girls in education and the lack of access to a female-controlled methods of prevention. Some of these vulnerabilities are intertwined and play a great role on the impact of AIDS on women. By addressing these causes women will be enabled to use and adopt the public health services and prevention strategies that are provided and recommended as part of the AIDS prevention, care and treatment package.

Violence and the threat of violence dramatically increase women's vulnerability to HIV. In many cases, intoxicated spouses return home and forcefully demand sex. In such situation, gender-based violence obstructs AIDS prevention efforts because individuals fear being beaten if, for example, they seek testing or attempt to negotiate safe practices such as condom use with partners. As a result, people who are not yet infected are at risk of infection, and people already infected may never know their sero-status and continue to spread the virus.

Now, I would also like to share with you the HIV situation in Ethiopia and what we are doing to address the problem. The national prevalence is 2.1% and in urban areas like Addis Ababa it reaches up to 7.7%. The current estimate of people living with the virus is 997,000.

To address the epidemic, our Government designed a strategy to combat HIV/AIDS based on the three pillars namely; prevention, treatment and care and support. When the strategic plan of the country was launched in January 2005 by our Prime minister, the number of people on free ART was only 900 compared to 95,908 now. Community conversations are now common and resulting in the participation of people in addressing the problem. The number of people who are getting tested is also increasing from time to time like 2.5 million people have been tested so far

of which 254,843 were tested positive. The number of VCT facilities has increased from 658 to 1005 in two years time. Similarly ART sites have increased from only 3 hospitals in 2005 to 265 hospitals and health centers currently. Although we have seen encouraging results we have to act more aggressively to reach the people in need of the therapy.

The encouraging results have been achieved due to the concerted efforts of all stakeholders. The support of the international community in the fight against HIV/AIDS has been unprecedented and I would like to recognize and thank all the partners and notably PEPFAR, the Global Fund and the World Bank.

Ladies and gentlemen the issue at hand is now how can we increase the access to the services in a sustainable manner and also try to solve the root causes mentioned above. So let us give renewed focus to root causes that have been ignored in the context of HIV for far, far too long.

Over the next three **days**, the workshop is expected to draw practical recommendations and effective communication strategies that would help to answer some of the key questions.

In closing, I wish you successful deliberations and pleasant time during your stay and welcome you all to the millennium celebration where we promise our nations better life.

I thank you.