

- **Honorable President of the Senate,**
- **Honorable Speaker of the Parliament,**
- **Honourable Ministers,**
- **Members of the Senate,**
- **Members of the Parliament,**
- **Dear sisters living with AIDS,**
- **Dear partners,**
- **Ladies and Gentlemen,**

I would like to begin by thanking the Ministry of Health and the National Aids Control Commission for inviting me to launch the “National Accelerated Plan for Women, Girls, Gender Equality and HIV 2010 – 2014”.

I am particularly pleased to see that you have chosen the most esteemed legislative chambers of our nation as the venue for the launch.

I thank the Honourable Speakers of our Senate and Parliament for not only accepting to host this important initiative, but also for demonstrating that they are prepared to be at the forefront of the effort to have an integrated, multi-sectoral response to the fight against HIV AIDS.

It is, indeed, a welcome opportunity to address you and highlight the issues of women and girls in the context of the AIDS epidemic. It is also important to stress the importance of having a National plan to accelerate actions for women, girls, gender equality and HIV.

For too long we were silent about HIV AIDS. As nations, as families, as communities and as individuals: we were in denial.

- I do not need to tell you about the stigma of shame that sufferers lived under;
- I do not need to remind you of how people concealed the real nature of their illness;
- I do not need to show you how much this has cost us as a nation;
- And through all this, it is unfortunate that women have unfairly borne the brunt of condemnation from society, in the spread of this disease.

The launch of this plan, that is designed in its nature to respond to studies that show women and girls are most affected and most vulnerable, is therefore a very strong indication that the clouds of denial are blowing away. A new dawn motivates us and reminds us that we need to continuously promote and protect human rights of women and girls, so that the HIV epidemic does not reveal a gap between rhetoric and reality.

The National Accelerated Plan demonstrates that we have changed our mindsets and we are determined in words and deeds. With this plan, we can ensure that women and girls not only have the knowledge and power to protect themselves, but also take their rightful, equal place as advocates, leaders and policy makers who drive change.

Our fight on the battle front of HIV/AIDS has made it very clear that unless we effectively address gender inequality and stop discrimination and violence against women and girls in our country, we simply will not be able to stop the spread of HIV.

As we launch the National Accelerated Plan, let us resolve to continue the fight against AIDS with the rigor and tenacity required to end this epidemic. Women and girls must be able to fully enjoy all human rights – including the right to negotiate safe sex - and live their lives free of violence and stigma. Much more should be invested in the participation and leadership of women and girls living with HIV, so that they can gain access to decision-making spaces and become ‘agents of change’ in our response to HIV/AIDS.

Ladies and gentlemen,

- We need to ensure that funding for the AIDS response is allocated adequately and equitably so that women and girls can fully access services;
- We need to promote better collection of data and better monitoring, so that we are able to ensure that investments result in real and meaningful improvements in the lives of women and girls,
- And, we need to engage more effectively with men and boys as we tackle the harmful gender norms that enhance vulnerability.

Our challenge is to make access a reality for all. Gender equality must be at the core of all of our actions. Together as government, civil society and development partners, we must energize the global response to AIDS, while vigorously advancing gender equality. These causes are undeniably linked.

We therefore reiterate our firm commitment in the advocacy necessary for achieving results defined in this plan.

On this note, I am extremely honoured to declare the official launch of the “National Accelerated Plan for Women, Girls, Gender Equality and HIV 2010 – 2014.”

Thank you for your kind attention.