

**Remarks by H.E. Ellen Johnson Sirleaf**  
**President of the Republic of Liberia**  
**At Launch of Women's Health Commission for the African Region**  
**Monrovia City Hall, Wednesday, April 14, 2010**

**Vice President Boakai;**

**Speaker Tyler;**

**Dr. Luis Gomes Sambo, WHO Regional Director for Africa;**

**Honorable Ministers;**

**The Special Representative of the United Nations Secretary-General;**

**The Doyen and Members of the Diplomatic Corps;**

**Members of the Commission on Women's Health in the African Region;**

**Ministers and Officials of Government;**

**Women of Africa;**

**Ladies and Gentlemen:**

**What brings us here today, Ladies and Gentlemen, are some sobering statistics. The fact:**

- that maternal mortality in sub-Saharan Africa is the highest in the world, estimated at 900 per 100,000 live births;**
- that almost 10 years after Governments at the Millennium Summit pledged to reduce by three-**

**quarters the maternal mortality ratio by 2015, one out of 26 women in sub-Saharan Africa is still at risk of dying during childbirth, or becoming infertile or disabled as a result of it;**

- that here, in my own country, the maternal mortality rate stands at close to 1 in every 100 live births.**

**Statistics are vital in public policy work: they provide us with the evidence that we need to understand a problem; they point towards the tools we need to tackle that problem; and they reveal whether our actions are making a difference or not.**

**But we must never forget that behind these numbers, behind these statistics, there are real people -- real women like us, our sisters, and mothers, our cousins and daughters.**

**Women who, far too often in our continent, are still dying even as they bring life into the world.**

**Women who not only pay the ultimate price themselves, but whose tragic and unnecessary deaths spread misery and hardship for their families and their communities.**

**That is why we are here today -- because rationally, we understand the importance of the figures, but also because we grasp the implication of these numbers with our hearts.**

**That is why we are coming together to tackle this tragedy, by launching the Women's Health Commission for the African Region. We expect that the Commission will draw on the expertise of all disciplines, to generate the evidence we need to understand what factors**

**influence the health of women in sub-Saharan African countries, and to make recommendations on what needs to be done from all perspectives to improve their lot. We especially want to reduce the unacceptable level of maternal mortality.**

**I want to extend a very warm welcome to everyone here today. It is with great honor and humility that I serve as Honorary President on this historic occasion, as we come together to pool our collective knowledge and expertise in finding solutions to what is a preventable health problem among African women.**

**I commend you, Dr. Sambo for your own leadership and who, with the support and leadership of Dr. Margaret Chan, prioritized an agenda focusing on women's health and development.**

**Special thanks go also to the Health Ministers of African Member States who, at the 2008 Session of the WHO Regional Committee for Africa, when confronted with such appalling data, adopted a resolution on women's health -- AFR/RC58/R1 -- which laid the foundation for establishing this Commission which we are launching today.**

**I commend the members of the Commission -- consisting of parliamentarians and politicians, sociologists, economists, epidemiologists, public health physicians, researchers, obstetricians and gynaecologists -- for giving of their time to this worthy cause.**

**Distinguished Guests:**

**Now is the time to step up our efforts, in partnership with other multilateral and bilateral institutions, to address the issue of women's health, gender, and human**

**rights, in order to achieve a rapid and tangible impact in Africa.**

**Here, in Liberia, while the ratio of maternal deaths remains intolerable, we are taking measures to address it, having prioritized women's health in our national development agenda -- the Poverty Reduction Strategy (PRS). This road map for our future development includes actions to: strengthen the health system; increase access to healthcare; empower women through income-generating activities; and increase the role of women in leadership. In addition, our Government has taken steps toward free healthcare for women and children.**

**Distinguished Guests:**

**In launching the Commission on Women's Health in the African Region, we need to recognize that women's health remains a critical issue despite commitments and efforts of our Governments to improve it.**

**We must integrate women's health issues into existing national programs based on gender, human rights and equity.**

**In order for women to play an active development role, we must ensure that:**

- We *advocate* for women's health through the implementation of national and international strategies and conventions.**
- We *scale up health services for women*. The ingredients for reducing deaths among women in their reproductive years must include increased access to healthcare services in their communities**

and in the rural areas, and encouraging active community participation in the health of women.

- **We empower women** to provide them with appropriate information on the risks of diseases and on how to pursue healthier lifestyles.
- **We mobilize increased resources for health.** In the 2001 Abuja Declaration, our respective Governments vowed to allocate 15 percent of their national budgets to the health sector.
- **We support the work of this new Commission on Women's Health,** so that Member States can benefit from the expertise of the Commission and from technical advice from international organizations, including the WHO.

**Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen:**

**As Honorary President of this Commission, I pledge to do my part to raise the issue with other African leaders in the various forums, to work with them to promote the importance of the life and health of Africa's women. I look forward to receiving from this expert body the rigorous evidence-based information that will help Governments take sound decisions to deliver the improvements we all aspire to.**

**The task ahead is challenging, and will require all of our support, but we can make a difference. Indeed, we must make a difference.**

**So that together we bring down those shameful numbers with which I began my address today.**

**But more importantly for our families and our communities, for the lives of our citizens, we must make a difference so that we can prevent the personal tragedies of children having to grow up without their mothers, of families who live with the pain of needlessly losing a sister, or a cousin, or a daughter. So that we do all we can to protect our women as they give birth to the next generation, and to our future.**

**I thank you.**