

**First Lady Jeannette Kagame's remarks at the
20th International Conference on AIDS and STIs in
Africa (ICASA)**

During the Youth-led session themed:

*“Ending the HIV epidemic among adolescent girls
and young women in Africa: What will it take?”*

Wednesday, 4th December 2019

Kigali, Rwanda

Ministers,

Distinguished Representatives of UNAIDS and UNICEF,

Esteemed Partners and Guests,

Dear Youth,

Good Afternoon.

As I begin, I would first like to express my gratitude, for the invitation to join this youth-led event on **“Ending the HIV epidemic among adolescent girls and young women in Africa”**.

It is always inspiring to be in the presence of young and bright individuals, so my hope for today is that we have an open conversation with one another; and that we treat this forum as a ‘safe space’ where your ideas will be heard, and acted upon.

Dear Girls,

Today, we are asked, ***“What will it take?”***

- What will it take for us, your elders, to prepare you to face the realities of this world?
- What will take for you, our youth, to appreciate that only you can be in the driver’s seat of your own lives?

- What will it take for you, our girls, to recognize the tremendous power inherent in each one of you, and act upon it?

You are the pillars of our communities. You have the agency to bring about change for yourselves, and those around you. Yet, despite this tremendous potential, girls remain one of the most vulnerable groups affected by HIV/AIDS.

According to UNAIDS, girls account for **three of every five** new HIV infections in Sub-Saharan Africa among 15-to-19 year-olds.¹ Adolescent girls and young women are twice as likely to be living with HIV, than young men of the same age.²

Esteemed ladies and gentlemen,

There are signs of hope. The number of new, annual HIV infections, among children in Global Plan priority countries in Africa, fell by 43% between 2009 and 2013, to the lowest level since the 1990s.³ In Rwanda, mortality among people living with HIV has decreased by 82% in the last two decades.⁴

¹ https://www.unaids.org/sites/default/files/media_asset/2019_women-and-hiv_en.pdf

² [https://www.thelancet.com/journals/langlo/article/PIIS2214-109X\(19\)30404-8/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/langlo/article/PIIS2214-109X(19)30404-8/fulltext)

³ https://www.unaids.org/sites/default/files/media_asset/JC2746_en.pdf

⁴ https://www.unaids.org/sites/default/files/country/documents/RWA_2017_countryreport.pdf

However, we cannot afford to be complacent. We cannot allow this epidemic to rob us of ***you***, our future leaders and pioneers.

Dear Girls,

Esteemed Partners,

We still face challenges.

We are striving to attain universal health coverage. But too many adolescent girls and young women continue to fall through the cracks.

So let's assess our battle plan.

I put the question to you, the young people here:

- **What are we missing?**
- **What do you expect from us, your elders, to help you make informed decisions about your lives?**
- **And most importantly, what should *you* do to uplift one another, and address unhealthy behaviors and attitudes?**

Our struggle will only be complete, when we all emerge strong and successful.

This is an opportunity to address preconceived notions about gender roles and the meaning of bodily integrity.

This includes:

- inadequate access for adolescents to sexual and reproductive health information and youth-friendly services,
- as well as harmful gender norms and practices.

Distinguished Guests,

Allow me to give a few examples, of how we are working to address these issues, at my organization, the Imbuto Foundation.

The **12 Plus project** created ‘safe spaces’ to teach young girls aged 10-12, about their sexual and reproductive health, and to reduce their vulnerability by promoting a savings culture. So far, 30,000 girls have been mentored.

Our projects in **Adolescent Sexual Reproductive Health** have helped over 300,000 adolescents and youth access birth control counseling, HIV and STI testing, as well as gender-based violence prevention services. We also work to improve communication between parents and adolescents, and to reintegrate teen mothers within their families.

Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen,

Let me conclude with an appeal to all of us here, to deepen our commitment to the partnerships required to bring about sustainable change, for our adolescent girls and young women.

To you the youth I say, once again, **believe** and **act** like you are our most valuable asset. No other person understands your challenges the way you do. Take the lead in this fight.

Help us create even more innovative solutions.

All of us here, have the power to be creators of legacy, that benefits the girls who follow us. That is the mission we are called upon to embrace, together, today and every day.

I thank you all for your kind attention.