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WHO launches Commission on Women's Health in the African region.

Monrovia, Liberia 14 April 2010 - President Johnson-Sirleaf of Liberia has urged African governments that, now is the time to step up 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 tangible impact in Africa.

She made these remarks at a ceremony to launch the Commission on Women's Health in the African region today in Monrovia, Liberia.

President Johnson-Sirleaf who is also the Honorary President of the Commission said that almost 10 years after Governments at the Millennium Summit pledged a three-quarter reduction in maternal mortality ratio by 2015, one out of 26 women in sub-Saharan Africa is still at risk of dying during childbirth, becoming infertile or disabled as a result of it. She reminded the delegates that behind these statistics are real women who not only pay the ultimate price themselves but whose tragic and unnecessary death spread misery and hardship to their families and communities.

"That is why we are here today – not only because rationally we understand the importance of these figures but also because we grasp the implication of these numbers with our hearts", she emphasized.

The Honorary President further pointed out that in order for women to play an active developmental role, advocacy for women's health should be carried out through the implementation of national and international strategies and conventions. She called on African governments to empower women, scale up women's health services and mobilize increased resources for health in line with the Abuja Declaration.

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

President Johnson-Sirleaf commended the leadership of Dr Sambo and the Director-General of WHO, Dr Margaret Chan for prioritizing an agenda focused on women's health and development. She thanked members of the Commission and pledged to do her part to raise women's health issues with other African leaders in the various forums and work with them to promote the importance of life and health of Africa's women.

The 17 member multidisciplinary Women's Health Commission, set up by WHO Regional Director for Africa, Dr Luis Sambo, will provide more evidence on the key factors influencing the current state of women's health in Africa and make recommendations on what needs to be done across all sectors to achieve rapid and sustainable improvements.

In his address, Dr Sambo called for urgent and appropriate actions to deal with the issues affecting women's health such as physical, sexual and psychological violence, low economic

status, illiteracy, early marriage of young girls and female genital mutilation which occur daily in African societies.

“Women’s role in society goes far beyond childbearing and includes other dimensions. The Liberian society demonstrates the multiple role women can play from the household level to leading the entire nation. Women need to be in good health and be given the opportunity for them to unleash their potential for social and economic prosperity”.

Dr Sambo pointed out that the health sector has a specific responsibility in providing quality health care that responds to specific women’s health needs along the life cycle, including safe pregnancy.

“These endeavours require strong leadership, multidisciplinary thinking and multi-sectoral actions at all levels including communities, families and individuals” he added.

The Regional Director underscored the importance of firm commitment and urged political leaders, governments, public health practitioners, the academia, research communities and the international community to commit to accelerating efforts for more sustainable gains in women’s health.

Welcoming the establishment of the Commission, the Special Representative of the United Nations Secretary-General in Liberia, Ellen Loj said she looks forward to the Commission realising its full potential and that through its work, good health and equitable health care will become a reality for women throughout Africa. She expressed her hope that the Commission will be inspired by the UN Secretary-General’s plea to address the “global shame” resulting from the deplorable conditions of women’s’ health and well-being.

Dr Richard Sexibera, Minister of Health of Rwanda and current Chairman of the WHO Regional Committee for Africa congratulated the Regional Director for implementing the resolution to establish the Women Health Commission. He said in many countries in sub Saharan Africa too many women still die while giving life and most of these deaths are preventable with concerted political action and smart investments. He added that women’s’ access to health must be a critical component of Africa’s development agenda.

The launching ceremony was attended by Cabinet ministers, senior government officials, Heads of Diplomatic missions accredited to Liberia, representatives of UN agencies, bilateral and multilateral institutions.

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