

ICW KENYA



International Community of  
Women Living With HIV/AIDS



## PRESS STATEMENT

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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### INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY OF WOMEN LIVING WITH HIV EASTERN AFRICA AND KENYA CHAPTER CONDEMN PUBLIC DISCLOSURE OF HIV STATUS OF WOMEN LIVING WITH HIV

The International Community of Women Living with HIV (ICW) Kenya Chapter and ICW Eastern Africa (ICWEA) congratulate the *National AIDS and STI Control Program (NASCOP)* and its partners, including *National AIDS Control Council (NACC)*, *Beyond Zero Campaign Secretariat* and *Joint United Nations Programme on HIV and AIDS (UNAIDS)* on the launch of the revised Kenya Framework for the Elimination of Mother-to-Child Transmission (eMTCT) of HIV and Syphilis (2016-2021). This took place during the *Beyond Zero Summit* held at the Kasarani Indoor Arena on 12 June 2017. As women living with HIV, we acknowledge that the framework will go a long way in guiding efforts to prevent HIV transmission, and reducing the numbers of new HIV infections.

However, both ICW-Kenya and ICWEA strongly condemn the action of the organizers of the *Summit* of parading women living with HIV and their children on live television, and publicly disclosing their HIV status. We are reliably informed that this disclosure was without the informed consent of the women concerned. We are further informed that the women agreed to attend the *Summit* as participants in a larger meeting some clearly expressing that they did not want their photos or images to appear on any media platforms. However, the organizers opted to isolate the women and their children from other participants, branded them and then paraded them at the *Summit*. This parade was reported and published by various Television (TV) stations, newspapers, and on social media platforms, including social media accounts of the organizers of the *Summit*. We are dismayed by this act that violated the confidentiality, right to privacy and dignity of women living with HIV.

While ICW-Kenya and ICWEA urges continued and accelerated actions by all partners to end vertical transmission of HIV, we call for the respect and protection of the fundamental human rights of both the mothers and their children. We are reliably informed that most of the women paraded had not yet disclosed their status to their loved ones, including their immediate family members. It should be noted that the public disclosure of HIV status without proper safeguard mechanisms exposes women and their children to an increased risk of HIV related gender based violence, stigma and discrimination within their families, their place of employment, public ridicule, castigation of their children and potential side lining of these families in the communities that they live in.

This further intensifies many of the pre-existing challenges of HIV prevention and treatment programs especially in a country where the overall stigma index is 45.16%, a fact that should have been well known to the organisers. The women reported further ill-treatment at the luncheon following the parade: with their hungry and tired children, they had to wait for hours for their allowances and transport - as late as 10.00pm yet the function ended at 2.00pm or thereabout. ICW-Kenya and ICWEA condemns this apparent lack of organization that subjected women living with HIV and their children to mental and physical anguish, and posed grave danger to their security.

In addition, the parading and unlawful disclosure of the women's status violated the provisions of the Constitution of Kenya, the HIV and AIDS Prevention and Control Act (HAPCA), and the East African Community HIV Prevention and Management Act 2016 that clearly recognize the right to privacy and dignity of persons living with HIV. We further condemn initiatives that portray women as being solely responsible for the HIV status of their children and reiterate that prevention of HIV is both the responsibility of men and women, the reason it is called vertical transmission. We fight against this gender injustice and stereotyping.

ICW-Kenya and ICWEA calls upon all the partners in Kenya to ensure that efforts to reach pregnant and breastfeeding women living with HIV should go hand in hand with access to up to date and accurate information, including respect for and protection of their human rights. Real progress towards reducing vertical transmission and achieving viral load suppression can only be made by upholding the rights of women living with HIV, investing in community-based responses, and ensuring universal access to quality health services. The parading reverses the gains and efforts made by the Kenyan Government and the international community to fight stigma and discrimination against people living with HIV. It also underscores the need for the government to put in place measures to comply with laws and policies that protect people living with HIV.

We therefore demand that NASCOP, NACC, Beyond Zero Secretariat and UNAIDS take responsibility for this action that compromised the rights and safety of women living with HIV, issue a public apology and undertake measures to compensate the concerned women for violation of their rights.

We further demand that organizers of this *Summit* share, within two weeks, the following information: first, measures that were taken to prepare the women for public disclosure, including counselling and the consequences of the public disclosure; second, measures that were put in place to prevent undesirable consequences of the public parade, including exposure to domestic violence, stigma and discrimination; and thirdly, measures put in place to deal with

negative messaging and gender stereotyping of women as solely responsible for prevention of HIV transmission to children.

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