

**THE REPUBLIC OF UGANDA**

**REMARKS**

**BY**

**HON ASAMO HELLEN GRACE**

**MINISTER OF STATE FOR DISABILITY AFFAIRS**

**DURING**

**THE LAUNCH OF THE TRANSLATED VERSION OF THE NATIONAL POLICY GUIDELINES ON ENDING HIV STIGMA AND DISCIRIMINATION FOR PERSONS WITH VISUAL AND HEARING DISABILITIES**

**31ST OCTOBER 2023**

**AT HOTEL AFRICANA**

* **The Hon Minister for the Presidency**
* **Hon. Members of Parliament Present**
* **Chair Person Uganda AIDS Commission**
* **Country Director UNAIDS**
* **Representatives of AIDS Development Partners**
* **Resident City Commissioner**
* **Ministries and District Representatives**
* **People Living with HIV**
* **Persons with Disabilities**
* **Civil Society family**
* **The Media fraternity**
* **Distinguished Delegates**
* **Ladies and Gentlemen**
* **Protocols observed**

1. Ladies and gentlemen, I greet you in the name of the Almighty God. I also bring greetings from the Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development.
2. Dear delegates, I wish to appreciate the efforts of all partners namely the People with Disabilities, People Living with HIV, the Development Partners, Members of Parliament, Civil Society, District representatives, the media and Uganda AIDS Commission for all your efforts in the national HIV and AIDS response.
3. I am informed that HIV prevalence in Uganda has significantly reduced from 18% in the early 80’s to 5.2%. While AIDS related death has equally reduced from 54,000 in 2010 to 17,000.
4. Despite the positive progress, we need to do more as we work towards ending AIDS as a public health threat by 2030 especially among vulnerable groups such as Persons with Disabilities.
5. According to a 2019 rapid survey by National Council for Persons with Disabilities, and one by NUDIPU. The Women with disabilities interviewed complained of health workers who rudely question why they get into sexual relationships and end up with HIV, yet they know that they have disabilities.
6. In the same survey, it was revealed that there are beliefs that when an infected person has sex with a person with disability, he / she can be healed. It has made people with disabilities especially girls and women more vulnerable to defilement, rape and sexual abuse
7. According to a 2023 study by Mbarara University of Science and Technology, on Health System Responsiveness, among Persons on HIV and Disability; it was concluded that inequitable access to HIV and AIDS Treatment, for People With Disabilities, is a hurdle to ending the pandemic by 2030
8. The study observed that “all the HIV health workers interviewed expressed frustration with lack of communication skills in attending to patients who could not talk or hear”. Majority of the HIV and AIDS care facilities have no braille or sign language services to help communicate with clinicians. Some clinicians do not know the local language hence cannot benefit from the sign language interpretation of the care giver, majority of whom do not know English in the rural setting.
9. The study also found out that many Persons with Disabilities living with HIV, complained of being ignored because they could not hear their names being called at HIV clinics.
10. Similarly, according to the 2016 Uganda demographic health survey (UDHS), women with disabilities were less likely than non-disabled women to obtain pre-test HIV counseling (60% compared to 52%), an HIV test result (68% compared to 61%), among others.
11. In responding to the epidemic, Uganda has a National Strategic Plan (NSP) 2020/21-2024/25 that has four themes, namely Prevention, Care and Treatment, Social support and Protection, and Systems Strengthening.
12. The National Strategic Plan identified stigma and discrimination as one of the key bottlenecks towards HIV epidemic control, and therefore put emphasis on scaling up efforts to eliminate all forms of HIV related stigma and discrimination of People living with or affected by HIV, and other vulnerable groups such as PWDs.
13. In line with the principle of leaving no one behind, I am happy that Government of Uganda through Uganda AIDS Commission (UAC), is steadily recognizing PWDs in the country agenda of ending stigma and discrimination.
14. The prioritization of Persons with Visual and Hearing disabilities through translated and brailed copies of the National Policy Guidelines on ending HIV stigma and discrimination, is a big step in the disability inclusion journey.
15. I am happy that these guidelines are being launched today, and I look forward to a robust dissemination plan in different formats and involving the right experts to ensure effective dissemination.
16. I am also impressed that Uganda Aids Commission has since assigned Disability, a Self-Coordinating Entity Status (SCE). I yet to receive the details on this critical set up; but if well constituted, this would be a significant step forward, in ensuring that the issues and needs of PWDs, are meaningfully included in the national HIV&AIDS response.
17. I look forward to the detailed set up of the Disability self-coordinating entity, which I expect to increase the voice, and budget allocations customized to the unique needs per category of Persons with Disabilities in the HIV & AIDS programming space.
18. As highlighted in the different survey reports, the new disability self-coordinating entity, should also steer amendments of key HIV & AIDS policy documents, to cater for reasonable accommodation and special needs of Persons with Disabilities per category.
19. Some of the questions that we all need to reflect on include:
20. If Persons without disabilities living with HIV face stigma and discrimination; then what happens to Persons with Disabilities when they also acquire HIV?
21. If Persons without Disabilities face challenges accessing HIV prevention and treating services; what about the Persons with disabilities who by nature have accessibility barriers?
22. What does it take for affirmative action and reasonable accommodation to be effectively put in place, so as to meaningfully target each category of Persons with Disabilities, in practical terms not in theory?

When me and you answer these questions, Persons with Disabilities will appreciate that Uganda has a disability inclusive HIV & AIDS response mechanism.

Finally, I call upon all stakeholders to ensure we implement these translated versions to reach all communities of Persons with visual and hearing impairments in Uganda.

**FOR GOD AND MY COUNTRY**