

A MESSAGE FROM  

## A Call from the Heart: Let's Embrace Breastfeeding and End Vertical HIV Transmission in Africa

As we embrace the spirit of World Breastfeeding Week, which was celebrated this month, we find ourselves reflecting on the incredible power of this natural act and the positive impact it can have on our lives. Supported by the World Health Organisation, UNICEF, Ministries of Health, and passionate civil society organizations worldwide, this special week celebrates the beauty of breastfeeding while also raising awareness about its benefits.

The first 1 000 days of a child's life are the most delicate and important in laying the foundations for healthy growth and development. Breastfeeding plays a key role in this process. [Studies](#) have shown that breastfeeding is not only good for nutrition, but it also has antibodies that protect infants from many childhood illnesses, breastfed babies perform better on intelligence tests and are less likely to and less prone to diabetes later in life. Women who breastfeed also have a reduced risk of breast and ovarian cancers.

However, as we celebrate, let us not forget that there are still challenges faced by expectant and breastfeeding women living with HIV. Despite the advancements in destigmatizing breastfeeding for many women, these brave souls continue to grapple with hurdles on their journey. They find themselves at the intersection of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the African Union's [Agenda 2063](#), striving for democratic values, human rights, and justice while seeking inclusive societies and sustainable development. Yet, we ask ourselves, how can we truly make progress when there is a population of women and children directly affected by HIV, falling within service delivery, treatment, and comprehensive sexual and reproductive education gaps?

Hope is our guiding light in these challenging times. According to the [2023 UNAIDS Global AIDS Update](#), there is progress on the horizon. A significant proportion of pregnant or breastfeeding women living with HIV in Africa are now receiving antiretroviral therapy, marking a significant improvement from 48% in 2010 to about 82% of pregnant or breastfeeding women living with HIV were receiving antiretroviral therapy in 2022.

Countries in eastern and southern Africa, like Botswana, have achieved milestones on the path to eliminating vertical HIV transmission. Their programs have saved millions of children from HIV infections since 2000.

Nonetheless, let us not rest on our laurels, for there is much work to be done. According to the [same report](#), globally, around 220,000 pregnant or breastfeeding women living with HIV still lack access to antiretroviral drugs. Western and central African countries, in particular, face challenges, with only about 53% of pregnant or breastfeeding women living with HIV benefiting from vertical transmission prevention programs in 2022.

Amidst these challenges, we must look towards regional collaborations, like the Campaign for the Accelerated Reduction of Maternal Mortality ([CARMMAPlus](#)), an African Union Commission initiative, endorsed by all members states. CARMMA has shown promise in elevating Reproductive, Maternal, Newborn, Child, and Adolescent Health (RMNCAH) indicators. Their continued dedication to promoting policy dialogue, advocacy, and community mobilization gives us hope that change is possible.

Another beacon of hope shines through [Africa REACH](#), an African-led advocacy initiative committed to ending AIDS in children and young people in Africa, by 2025. Their recently published [Strategic Plan 2023-2025](#) demonstrates a strong focus on reducing vertical transmission rates through health-systems strengthening and strategic partnerships.

Let us remember that breastfeeding women living with HIV are not synonymous with vertical transmission. The World Health Organization encourages adherent antiretroviral therapy (ART) for all mothers living with HIV to safeguard their health and the wellbeing of their infants. Breastfeeding, when combined with ART, is a safe option, promoting exclusive breastfeeding for the first six months, followed by complementary feeding until 12 months of age.

To achieve lasting progress, we must hold ourselves accountable. We implore governments and local regulators to actively promote services and tools supporting mothers living with HIV in adhering to treatment and breastfeeding. Employers, decision-makers, and communities must create supportive environments that debunk myths and reduce stigma surrounding breastfeeding while living with HIV.

***We call upon political leaders across the region to strengthen policies, increase budgets, and prioritize ending vertical transmission of HIV in Africa by 2025. Together, we can shape a future where every mother, regardless of her HIV status, can embrace breastfeeding with***

***confidence, ensuring a healthier and brighter tomorrow for our children and the generations to come.***

As proud advocates of maternal and child health, we are committed to working tirelessly to raise awareness and foster change. Let us join hands and hearts to embrace breastfeeding, end vertical HIV transmission, and create a world where every woman's journey is supported, respected, and celebrated.



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