

Remarks by Ambassador Michelle D. Gavin
Masiela Trust Fund Gala Dinner
Boipuso Hall
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As prepared for delivery

Remarks

- I want to thank the organizers for inviting me to join you at this event, which is at its heart about reminding us all, collectively, of our responsibility to care for orphans and vulnerable children.
- I get a lot of invitations, and the truth is that the ones for evening events always have to clear an especially high bar, because when I can, I try to have dinner with my family and keep us connected as we move through our busy days.
- But this was a very easy invitation to accept, because the cause we are here to support is so fundamental to our basic human decency, and to the hopes we all have for the future.
- There is certainly nothing controversial about the basic premise that we have a duty to protect vulnerable children. But there is a substantial difference between knowing something is true in an abstract sense, and taking any kind of personal responsibility in a concrete sense to address it.
- And we all become busy, with countless demands on our time and resources. Taking that next step—to protect these kids—is what all of us here tonight are striving to do.
- I use some very vivid memories I've collected over the course of my career to help me bridge that gap – I suspect many of you do the same.
- The vast majority of my professional career has been spent on U.S. policy toward sub-Saharan Africa. In fact, my professional experiences have exposed me to these issues abroad more than they have at home – but make no mistake, orphans and vulnerable children exist in every society, including my own in the United States of America.
- In every society, no matter how admirable on the whole, there are those who take advantage of the youngest and most defenseless among us in terrible ways, and there is neglect, plain and simple failure to care for children who are not equipped, financially or emotionally or physically, to care for themselves.
- I've come closest to these issues in various parts of Africa. When America woke up to the toll that the AIDS epidemic was taking overseas, I, along with hundreds of thousands, and ultimately millions of others, fought many battles to insist on an appropriate U.S. Government response.
- Part of this work involved site visits throughout the continent, to clinics and support groups and hospitals, and sometimes to orphanages. Even in societies where extended family networks normally would have absorbed children who lost their parents, AIDS took such a devastating toll that these networks were stretched far beyond their limits.
- So from South Africa to Ethiopia, I've been to orphanages where often the ratio of children to adults is so staggeringly off kilter that the little ones cling to a strange, foreign visitor the moment you walk through the door, so eager are they to experience the novelty of simply being touched – being held, being treated gently and affectionately and made to feel safe by a grown-up.

- And in the context of my work, I've visited other facilities, particularly in conflict zones in Central Africa, and I've seen a consequence even more grave. I've seen tiny children cower in fear at the sight of an adult – any adult – because experience has taught them that violence and intimidation and cruelty can be expected, with no reason and no warning.
- I've met with little girls so bewildered and hurt by sexual abuse that they cannot make any sense of their world anymore. I've seen so much human potential thrown away instead of nurtured.
- Of course these moments stay with you, they haunt you, and the truth is, since I had a child of my own and became a mother, the memories of these kids affect me even more powerfully, because now I understand so much more about just how innocent, how trusting, and how defenseless children are when they come into this world, and I feel much more deeply my own responsibility as an adult to do right by them.
- And here in Botswana, a country blessed with peace, with a government that invests in its people and made a pioneering commitment to fight HIV/AIDS, here in this truly admirable place, still it is not difficult to find children in real peril, without the kind of support and care that they need to develop their full potential.
- I'd like to take a step back and recall the recent history of issues regarding orphans and vulnerable children in Botswana.
- Sadly, like just about every country on Earth, child vulnerability is not a new or unique phenomenon here. And while OVC challenges have burdened Botswana for decades, the problem intensified by orders of magnitude when the HIV epidemic struck.
- Before the advent of lifesaving anti-retroviral treatment, before the implementation of the now globally acclaimed PMTCT program, AIDS deaths among adults left children in Botswana without primary caregivers.
- This calamity was not only caused by the loss of one or even both parents, but by losses of entire networks of extended families, neighbors, and teachers. Botswana children began to grow up without a wide circle of healthy adult role models.
- In recognition of this growing impact of the HIV epidemic, in 1998 the Ministry of Health rapidly assessed the range of OVC issues in Botswana.
- The investigation confirmed that many orphans did not have access to basic needs, including food and clothing. In certain instances, human rights of orphans were violated. Many orphans themselves were infected with HIV.
- With admirable speed and fortitude, the government declared “orphan hood” a national crisis that needed immediate intervention.
- A coordinated, short term approach was implemented in 1999. As with every fledging program, small steps lead to bigger steps, and eventually to major gains.
- By 2006, an evaluation of the short term plan of action found that it had indeed managed to reach virtually all eligible children. While this was a remarkable achievement, it was tempered.
- Food was made universally accessible, but less tangible needs, like emotional support were still lacking.

- Around this time, the European Union helped SADC develop and pilot the Circles of Support program in Swaziland, Namibia, and Botswana, as part of a coordinated response to the HIV toll in the region.
- This program was refined and expanded with support from my government through PEPFAR, and ultimately the Government of Botswana reached orphans and vulnerable children in 450 primary, junior and senior secondary schools throughout the nation.
- The concept of these support circles is truly holistic—beginning with self-reliance, moving to extended family and community support, and lastly to building an opportunity-driven environment through structural interventions and policy reform.
- In 2009, the Botswana parliament took the national OVC response one huge step further, and updated and passed the Children’s Act.
- This powerful policy stipulated for the first time a bill of rights for children and solidified the roles and responsibilities of key stakeholders in responding to the challenges of OVC.
- The following year, UNICEF supported the Government of Botswana to develop the National Plan of Action for OVC through 2016. The plan is currently guiding the OVC response, and is strategically aligned with all overarching governmental plans.
- A key aspect of the National Plan of Action is its purposeful focus on sustainability.
- In a time of declining international donor support, this plan outlines opportunities for children and their families to safely transition from receiving external assistance to becoming fully self-reliant.
- For example, families of vulnerable children are targeted for poverty eradication initiatives and income generation programs to help them become independent and break the cycle of vulnerability they face.
- These interventions are necessary because the magnitude of orphans and vulnerable children in Botswana remains substantial.
- Estimates from the 2001 population census and the 2008 Botswana AIDS Impact (or BAIS) Survey estimated that over 110,000 children in Botswana had lost one or both parents. This sobering figure represents over 16% of the total number of children in the country.
- Sixteen percent. No matter how many times we state it, it is difficult to come to grips with this number.
- There is promise, however. The numbers of orphans in Botswana appears to be declining. More recent data from 2010 showed that registered OVC numbers declined to around 80,000 and declined further this year to 76,000.
- This apparent progress is almost certainly the direct result of successful ARV intervention, ensuring longer and healthier lives of parents and guardians.
- And while the number of registered orphans decreases, the number of registered vulnerable children is increasing. Of course we must recognize the possibility that this does not indicate a true increase,

however, but rather improved detection, identification, and referral of these children to government programs – and in that sense, this is an achievement in and of itself.

- Since the United States Government launched the President’s Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief, or PEPFAR, eight years ago, we have worked closely with the Government of Botswana to coordinate priorities and agree on areas of focus, to further stretch national achievements in the OVC response. U.S. Government support of more than 50 million dollars since 2005 for the OVC program has complemented national approaches and focused on filling gaps that were identified by Botswana’s leadership.
- U.S. Government funding and technical expertise has focused on supporting activities that strengthen identification, assessment and referrals, so that vulnerable children and orphans can access services beyond their basic necessities of food, shelter, clothing, and education.
- As health services are a key priority, we supported the Ministry of Health to provide immunizations, HIV testing, comprehensive care for malnutrition among children, and other vital healthcare.
- In support of early childhood development, the U.S. Government supports the Ministry of Education to implement an integrated curriculum that includes health, social, emotional and psychosocial development of young children.
- These building blocks prepare them for formal schooling, in a setting where nutritional food and a safe environment are, or certainly should be, staples. We also help train families and caregivers to better address the special needs and challenges of vulnerable and orphaned children.
- Other programs that the United States assists with include income generating activities to help families affected by loss and poverty to improve household livelihoods. Several innovative community business groups have formed to produce gardens, poultry, bee-keeping, weaving, and other enterprises.
- One such success story is the Kgetsi Ya Tsie project in Tswapong. There, PEPFAR support helped strengthen a microfinance and lending activity for commodity production, marketing and sales of morula products– oil, soap, lip balm, and hand lotion.
- Not only is this effort environmentally friendly and locally based, but this group has also been able to integrate HIV prevention into their work. This is sustainability and innovation in action!
- Not coincidentally, these efforts touch on the three strategic focus areas for the U.S. Embassy in Botswana — health improvement, youth empowerment, and economic diversification. We are proud of our contributions, and we applaud our Botswana hosts for opening the door to donor innovation and strategically placing donor support in areas where programmatic gaps existed.
- Despite all the efforts in place, certain services remain in short supply.
- Early childhood development programs are not widely accessible, and services in many locations are not available at all.
- Capacity is lacking to provide quality services that motivate, stimulate and help prepare young children for later years.

- While efforts in economic diversification are laudable, they have a short reach and are often not market driven. Currently, staffing capacity is inadequate to coordinate multiple OVC programs and initiatives.
- Despite the efforts of the national and local government, and despite supplemental donor funding, major challenges still remain.
- Collectively, we have not adequately addressed the non-basic needs of these children that extend more deeply and are just as fundamental.
- We know that vulnerable children and orphans in particular, suffer abuse, neglect, and exploitation. We have not done enough to ensure their safety, their psychological care, and their recovery.
- We need to immediately address this gap, while also using upstream approaches to prevent them in the future.
- Improving identity and registration processes can enhance monitoring and tracking of children through the system and provide the safety checks that are currently lacking. Formalizing foster care and adoption, even family adoptions, is vital so that all children have a safety net.
- As we continue to strive towards an HIV-free generation, we don't know enough about HIV issues among children born into the epidemic. We can do more to trace and support children born HIV positive, especially as they mature into adolescence.
- Caregivers and HIV positive teens themselves need to be prepared for the multitude of issues that face them— medical care, nutrition, disclosure, treatment adherence, and of course, sexuality.
- I am happy to report that these topics are beginning to be addressed. Botswana and the U.S. Government hosted an international meeting on adolescent HIV just this year, and it is clear that all countries in the region face similar challenges.
- These are programmatic hurdles. Together we can and we will face them.
- More concerning however, the biggest threat to the future of the program is funding. These programs are hugely expensive and it will be difficult for the national program to sustainably cover the kinds of costs it faces. We must bring the price down by building in efficiencies, focusing on prevention, and diversifying funding.
- The Masiela Trust Fund is doing just that. Established in 2001, the Masiela Trust Fund raises funding for community and faith-based organizations involved in the care of orphans and vulnerable children.
- As we all know, the needs of these children are extensive. Masiela Trust Fund uses its experience, its connections, and its reputation to address the latest issues that face children and families in need, including exploitive practices like “property grabbing.”
- The Trust faces head on the more difficult problems that can elude routine structures — dealing with exploiters, perpetrators, and those that take advantage of our most vulnerable children and the resources provided for them.
- It also takes the next step in empowering children to know and defend their rights, to refuse the advances of persons who intimidate them, and to report abuses. This is particularly important with

regard to sexual abuse. With an average of 330 cases of defilement per year, it is abundantly – and painfully – clear that these children deserve better.

- And the work of the Masiela Trust is part of the solution. Please join me in applauding the Masiela Trust Fund for their commitment and willingness to face the toughest battles.
- We are here this evening to support the Masiela Trust Fund in their commendable work. As you know, the global economic crisis has resulted in waning international donor support.
- My own government, in this difficult fiscal climate, is working to rationalize our assistance programs so that we shift resources to areas where needs exist that we have a unique capacity to meet --- and ramping down in areas where others have all the tools they need to take the lead. While my government is limited in the dollars we can contribute to the challenges we are talking about tonight, our commitment to real partnership here in Botswana, and to building capacity through technical assistance, infrastructure development, and high quality evaluation is unwavering.
- The defenders of child rights here at Masiela Trust Fund need your assistance as well. The private sector, in particular, has an opportunity to contribute to the excellent work of the Fund, and help diversify its resources.
- I urge businesses and individuals here tonight to consider an ongoing contribution plan. Funds raised tonight will build the sustainability of local programs, and will help to improve their coordination.
- Together, we can continue to turn the tide and reduce child vulnerability, exploitation and abuse.
- No work is more honorable. It is a long fight, and we must pull together to see it to its completion.
- As an Ambassador, as a mother, and as a global citizen, I commend all of you here tonight for your commitment, your contribution, and your endurance. Together, we must continue making great strides in protecting our children. Pula!