GENEVA ¦ 20 May 2014 -- Dr **Christine Kaseba-Sata**, First Lady of **Zambia** (WHO Goodwill Ambassador against gender-based violence) and Melinda Gates, co-Chair of the **Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation** addressed delegates at the World Health Assembly this afternoon.

Dr Kaseba-Sata deplored the prevalence of violence against women and girls and the extent to which cases of violence remain hidden and unrecognized. A former gynaecologist, she noted the lasting damage such violence can inflict on mental and physical health: “Almost all gender-based violence victims fall on the doorstep of the health sector.”

She stressed that the health sector has a responsibility to address the causes and consequences of violence. She called on delegates to ensure that everyone affected by violence has timely, effective and affordable access to all the health services they require, and that those services are free of abuse, disrespect, and discrimination.

Ms Gates then highlighted ways to improve the health of mothers and newborn babies, emphasizing the value of linking efforts to improve reproductive, maternal, newborn and child health – “the continuum of care”.

She pointed out that: “If women can plan their families, they are more likely to space their pregnancies. If they space their pregnancies, they are more likely to have healthy babies. If women’s babies are healthy, they are more likely to flourish as children. When mothers have healthy pregnancies, and when children thrive, the positive benefits last a lifetime.”

She also called on delegates to pay more attention to newborn babies. Although there has been remarkable global progress in reducing the number of children dying before their fifth birthdays, neonatal mortality rates have declined at a slower pace. The Health Assembly will discuss a new action plan for newborns later this week. Ms Gates and other panellists at today’s technical briefing discussed quality of care around childbirth and its potential to end preventable deaths of mothers and newborn babies and stillbirths, generating a “triple return on investment”.