Opening Speech – Dr Salome

Mental Wellbeing of Migrant Women
AkiDwA 25th Anniversary Flagship Conference

Good morning, everyone,
You are all very welcome, and I want to sincerely thank you for being here with us today. It means a great deal to see so many community members, partners, practitioners, policymakers, and allies gathered in this space.

As we prepared to mark **25 years of AkiDwA**, I found myself asking an important question: *How do we begin this commemoration in a way that is honest, meaningful, and truly reflective of migrant women lived realities?* Very quickly, the answer became clear **mental wellbeing**.

Mental wellbeing emerged as the starting point because it touches every part of our lives. It shapes how we cope with change, how we connect with others, and how we speak out about our experiences. When we reflect on our mental wellbeing, it confirms whether we feel prepared to face challenges, recognise opportunities, and consider what we may need to do differently—individually and collectively.

When we speak about mental wellbeing, we are not only talking about crisis or clinical illness. We are also talking about **proactive, everyday practices** that support emotional, psychological, and social wellbeing—setting boundaries, practising mindfulness, making space for rest, and, in some contexts, recognising moments such as **Self-Love Month**, when we intentionally reflect on how we are truly doing.

This topic is deeply personal for me.
Over the last **24 years**, I have worked with **thousands of migrant women**, and my conversations with women consistently confirm how the challenges of everyday life—some small, others overwhelming—can deeply affect our wellbeing. Living in a new country, navigating unfamiliar systems, struggling to meet daily needs, and experiencing racism and discrimination all leave lasting impacts, even when women show remarkable strength.

In **2006**, we developed a mental wellbeing project within AkiDwA. At that time, many of us felt uncomfortable talking openly about *mental health*. There was stigma, fear, and silence. We realised, however, that while the language felt difficult, everyone could relate to **stress, pressure, sadness, and depression**—often caused by immigration challenges, isolation, housing insecurity, and exclusion.

That understanding led us to re-name the programme **"Let's Talk."** Creating space for conversation became our way of breaking silence and building trust.

Today, in **2026**, AkiDwA marks **25 years of advocacy, leadership, and migrant women-led community activism** in advancing the rights, dignity, and wellbeing of migrant women in Ireland. This conference is the **first flagship event of our anniversary year**, setting the tone for reflection, learning, and forward-looking action.

Over the past 25 years, AkiDwA has worked alongside women affected by migration, conflict, war, and displacement. We have offered not just services, but a **platform**—a space where migrant women could express themselves, support one another, and inform and influence policy. For many women, AkiDwA has not simply been an organisation; it has been a **home**.

I still remember a phone call I received four years ago, during the winter months. A woman told me she had been sleeping in her car because she had nowhere else to go. She asked me to help her before she died from the cold. That experience has stayed with me. It reminds us that mental wellbeing cannot be separated from housing, safety, dignity, and belonging. These realities shape how people cope, hope, and survive.

This conference is closely aligned with **AkiDwA's Strategic Plan 2026–2029**, which prioritises migrant women's **mental wellbeing, dignity, and inclusion** through **rights-based, trauma-informed, and community-led approaches**. These principles guide our work and our advocacy.

AkiDwA's research and policy contributions have been central to this journey. The **"Let's Talk" report (2020)** identified migration as a **critical social determinant of health**, recognising how experiences before, during, and after migration continue to shape mental wellbeing. More recently, **"Unheard Voices" (2025)** documented both the resilience and the unmet mental health needs of migrant women seeking asylum who are living in emergency accommodation centres in Ireland.

These findings remind us that **migration is a gendered and often traumatic experience**. Pre-migration experiences such as conflict, gender-based violence, poverty, and family separation often intersect with challenges during transit and after arrival. Racism, discrimination, insecure legal status, and prolonged stays in institutional or emergency accommodation place significant pressure on mental wellbeing—particularly in the context of rising anti-immigrant rhetoric and social exclusion.

And yet, despite all of this, migrant women continue to demonstrate extraordinary **strength, leadership, and collective resilience**. Their lived experiences and knowledge are essential to shaping effective, culturally responsive, and humane mental health supports. Resilience should never be used as an excuse for neglect, but rather as a reason to invest in meaningful, accessible care.

This conference creates space to centre those voices, to listen deeply, and to strengthen collaboration between migrant-led organisations, professionals, researchers, and policymakers. From AkiDwA perspective this conference is an opportunity not only to reflect on the past 25 years, but also to imagine what the next 25 years could look like if dignity, inclusion, and wellbeing are truly prioritised.

I would also like to acknowledge the vital work of our partners and community organisations represented here today, including **Aremoja, Sligo family resource centre, LEADER**, NWCI, INAR and so many others who continue to provide hope and support on the ground every day. This work is sustained through partnership, trust, and shared commitment.

As we begin this anniversary year, we are reminded of the importance of consistency of continuing to open our doors, to listen, and to work together. Supporting the mental wellbeing of migrant women is not just a health issue; it is a matter of **human rights, social justice, and collective responsibility**.

Thank you all for being part of this important moment. I look forward to the conversations, learning, and collaboration that will emerge from today.

Thank you.