

Remarks

by

First Lady Jeannette Kagame

At the Virtual Launch of the

Global Strategy to Accelerate the Elimination of Cervical Cancer

Tuesday, 17 November 2020

Kigali, Rwanda

**Excellency Tsepo Motsepe, First Lady of South Africa,
Your Royal Highness, Princess Dina Mired of Jordan,
Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, Director General of the WHO,
Dr. Zsuzsanna Jakab, Deputy Director-General of the WHO,
Esteemed **Speakers,**
Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen,**

It is an honour for me to join you all today, as we launch the Global Strategy to Accelerate the Elimination of Cervical Cancer.

First and foremost, I would like to pay tribute to the women whose lives we have lost and to those who are suffering the consequences of what is now known as a preventable and curable disease, when detected early and managed effectively.

In May 2018, the WHO, under the able leadership of its Director-General, Dr. Tedros Ghebreyesus, issued a Global Call for the Eradication of Cervical Cancer, noting that while the world had the knowledge and tools to address this preventable disease, women in developing countries continue to succumb to this disease at a disproportional rate.

Up to 93% of cervical cancers are preventable, but today, cervical cancer is the second largest killer of women in low and middle income countries after breast cancer. This is unacceptable when taking into account the available technology, policies and cost-effective measures for early diagnosis and treatment.

The HPV vaccine, Gardasil 9, has proven to be highly effective if administered before a girl or woman is exposed to the virus.

In Rwanda, the HPV vaccine was introduced in 2011, pushing us to initiate a countrywide strategy to fully implement WHO recommended programme to screen, treat and vaccinate targeted population groups.

We can attribute our success to a collaborative effort between leaders and community health workers at a national and grassroots level. Building on and leveraging the trust of the community in the public health system resulted in the successful implementation of the HPV programme. Today, the vaccine is included in the national immunisation regimen for children.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

With the knowledge and access at our disposal, we owe it to women and young girls to play an active role in accelerating the elimination of this cancer.

But there are still challenges ahead that warrant our urgent attention: The critical role and responsibility of men in reducing the incidence of cervical cancer. Indeed, to this day, cervical cancer information, prevention and care programmes have been gendered because of the media coverage -- and to a certain extent the medical system as well -- have focused on sensitizing girls and women, thus delaying male involvement and accountability.

Although HPV is the most common viral infection transmitted through sexual intercourse, HPV-related cancers are not common in men as it is in women who are likely to develop cervical cancer.

But to this day, there is limited knowledge of HPV among men, which comes with the risk of undermining the progress made so far. This is especially true of cultural settings where women are still striving for their full sexual and reproductive rights.

Hence, male partners must be actively involved in the cervical cancer prevention process, by increasing their awareness about the disease and its transmission; protecting their partners from HPV infections.

But also to ensure that at a young age, boys — just like young girls — are systematically vaccinated. Until then, the best prevention to protect women against this cancer will continue to be the use of condoms. Again, like most adversities, the burden of the responsibility continues to weigh heavily on women.

Rwanda's case and success in creating awareness at the highest level, as well as mobilising communities to adopt the appropriate health measures against this cancer, is proof that the change and progress we want is possible in every country.

To the women who have shared their experience in overcoming the arduous road to recovery from cervical cancer, and to the many more they represent, I want you to know that we hear you and see you. Events such as this Launch today will echo your plea to be protected from such a preventable and treatable cancer. I want you to know that we will continue to fight with you.

I thank you for your kind attention.