

**Her Excellency Mrs Jeannette Kagame
Remarks,**

Welcome Lunch - Elimination of Cervical Cancer

Kigali, 24 June 2022

**First Ladies of the Commonwealth Community,
Honorable Ministers of Health,
Dr Princess Nothemba Simelela, Assistant
Director-General for Strategic Programmatic Priorities
in Cervical Cancer Elimination,
Distinguished delegates, Honourable Guests and
Commonwealth Friends,**

Good afternoon, and thank you for being here today! A warmest welcome to Rwanda to you all.

Kigali is to many Rwandans, a jewel of our nation, and it shines brighter, with the presence of so many friends from the Commonwealth. May your experiences here in Rwanda, speak of the love Rwandans have for their country!

This Luncheon is indeed a unique occasion.

Dear Guests,

We are gathered here today, to discuss a human's right issue.

Cervical cancer is not just a medical phenomenon.

Cervical cancer is a preventable biological calamity, a socio-economic threat, and an entire civilization's moral trial, that condemns 9 out of 10 diagnosed women in low and middle-income nations, to a premature passing. Few tragedies have ever been as unforgiving in their deadliness.

Picture it with me a moment, **Dear Guests.**

Picture the brave and hopeful medical graduate, who delivers her first mass cervical cancer screening, here in Rwanda, or in some heavenly island in the Pacific Islands, or somewhere in the South of Asia.

Picture her dismay and horror, as the numbers of diagnosed cases rises, and her training, her expertise, has taught her one thing: most, if not all, of the women in front of her, that this cancer has latched on to, will die soon, will die in pain, and will die in vain.

Perhaps she begins to count the families that will be torn, and irreversibly wounded by the diagnostic that she is to deliver.

Perhaps the initial affection she had for her noble profession begins to dwindle, as she sees in real time, the obstacles that poorly strategized global governance and macro-economic policies, financial constraints, or worse – the indifference of some – can pose, in using her expertise, to stop people from dying.

But whatever she experiences in that moment of disturbing realization, in that confrontation with imminent, seemingly unavoidable death, she knows that what is to come, for the women who are to discover their diagnosis, is infinitely worse.

Honourable Guests,

I know you can sense the urgency in the room today.

Quite simply, there is no more time: we can no longer brandish softened truths to appease a public, that may itself, discover the cruelty of the global medical crises at hand, in much harsher ways – as it has over the past 3 years.

The facts are damning. The COVID-19 pandemic has led to devastating consequences for patients with all types of cancer. Many of these patients have experienced missed diagnoses and delayed treatment, due to health systems under pressure, and patient reluctance to seek medical care.

For women suffering with cervical cancer, Covid-19 has been additional leverage for their disease, which in our countries, thrives through compromised access to healthcare.

And this isn't all. Covid-19 has shone a light on one alarming truth: **the world is underfinancing its healthcare systems.**

Sadly, this is a cycle in itself. Medical infrastructure, medical research, medical training, medical tools and medicine, are all underfunded. This underfunding is then used as a justification, for why the rates of cervical cancer around the world are rising rapidly, despite commendable medical breakthroughs, in the past decade.

Commonwealth Friends,

This concerns every one of us directly, irrespective of Gender.

The Commonwealth features 43% of the cancer mortality around the world, despite hosting only 30% of the world's population. This discrepancy is not accidental; it points to a breakdown in our medical research partnerships, in our cross-border, cross-sector strategizing, and in our implementation of prevention policies.

If we fail, **Dear Guests**, to rectify these shortcomings immediately, instead of ensuring our unequivocal progress by 2030, we will be counting one fatality from cervical cancer, every 3 minutes.

The time of an average commute to work, at least half of a dozen women will have died from the disease.

Every night's sleep from then on, we would awaken to over 120 sisters across the world, dead from a sickness, that we hold the powers in our hands, to eliminate.

We must actively refuse to leave our children to such a fate, whether female or merely the child of one.

Honorable Guests,

I hope I have not placed a damper on the mood, this lovely afternoon.

Regardless of the grimness of the situation, the facts are that there is hope, there is reason, there are resources, and there are solutions.

The Global Cervical Cancer Elimination Strategy is a key to reaching our 2030 Sustainable Development Target 3.4, which aims to reduce by one third, the occurrence of premature death as the result of a Non-Communicable Disease.

One of the features of this strategy is the vaccination of girls under 13, against HPV. I am pleased to commend all member states of the Commonwealth, for committing to giving 100% of our girls under 13 the access to HPV vaccination.

Rwanda is no exception to this Commonwealth-wide commitment against cervical cancer.

Our immunization against Human Papilloma Virus (HPV) of young girls aged 12, has floated consistently above 90% since its introduction in 2011.

Screening, **Ladies and Gentlemen**, is also one of our top priorities. We are confident that in the next couple of years, before 2030, 70% of women eligible for cervical cancer screening will have received their potentially-life saving screening.

So like you, **Honourable Guests**, this country is aware that the fight against this disease is still ours to win; not in the distant future but **today**, if we make the commitments that matter.

- The Global Cervical Elimination Strategy is our guide;
- vaccines, screenings, and treatments are our tools,
- And, **Dear Friends**, the responsibilities we hold over women, and all members of the Commonwealth, in sickness as in health, are our manifesto.

Let's win this fight, together.

Thank you All!