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REMARKS OF HER  
EXCELLENCY MRS JEANNETTE  
KAGAME

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LANCET ONCOLOGY COMMISSION: CANCER IN SUBSAHARIAN  
AFRICA; EUROPEAN LAUNCH



SEPTEMBER 16, 2022

**Excellencies Ambassadors,  
Honourable Dignitaries,  
The Lancet Commissioners,  
Dedicated Health Professionals,  
Distinguished Guests,**

I feel optimistic today.

Solidarity, in improving the welfare of our continent, is palpable in the room.

I believe we are all here:

- to share the best practices,
- to share the wisdom,
- to share the resources,

To commit to eradicating NCDs in Sub-Saharan Africa, including cervical cancer, a preventable disease that **will not** stain the pages of our future.

Therefore, **Ladies and Gentlemen**, quite simply, I am certain, that we are all here because we care; as we must, as we always shall.

## **Esteemed Guests,**

I am no researcher. I am no doctor, or medical specialist. But at heart and by duty, I shall always strive to be an advocate.

Reportedly, cancer kills 10 million people every year – the gloomy equivalent, of the population of entire nations, such as this one; or the civilian death toll of the First World War.

I believe that we are all acquainted, with cancer's destructive power. Beyond this room, I can only imagine how many, have seen loved ones suffer at its hand. To those that have lost dear ones to cancer, may your healing and serenity come, and may they be accompanied, by the long-due cure, to this cruel affliction, at last.

## **Distinguished Guests,**

Upon receiving the invitation to this event, I immediately asked myself two questions.

The first, was why me?

While I am thankful for the Lancet Commission's recognition of the African First Ladies (OAFLAD), in advocating for cervical cancer prevention, screening and treatment, I was still somewhat perplexed.

The advancements Rwanda is proud of, regarding our race to 0 cervical cancer fatality, and we dare hope, this as early as 2030, are the materialization of a system's efforts.

I may have been proud to lend my voice, and the stage that this position has offered me, to carry the torch, from conference halls to private offices, from schools to communities, from Kigali to Stockholm....But this torch's fire was never mine to preserve, and neither was it my individual achievement.

I invite my brothers and sisters on the continent, in research, in medicine, in health management, in local politics, in public policy, to constantly question, to constantly reassess, their powers to drive and indeed demand the change, that the populations they are endowed to, require.

It has been so deeply motivating, such a cause for hopefulness, to see how nations mobilizing themselves, and securing mutually beneficial partnerships, built around the human responsibility to actually DO good (rather than talk a “Good game”), have improved the state of cervical cancer in Rwanda. If time allows, I should wish to get into that later.

But **Ladies and Gentlemen**, allow me to return to the second question that this lovely invitation provoked in me.

This question is one this much-needed Lancet Commission has sought to answer, with meticulous research, with an analytical identification of the gaps to fill. And yet - and for this I hope you will forgive me, brilliant researchers behind this body of work, and the institutions that have supported them - ...but, it did not fully dim my curiosity.

Why, as this rich Commission has highlighted, as our National Cancer Control Plan has enumerated, as the Frameworks we have established have shown, do we have the means, do we seemingly have the will, and yet, the Subsaharan region of our continent, is still struggling to get on track, to eliminating a cancer both distinctively deadly, and, just as distinctively, preventable?

What dots are we failing to connect?

Bridging the gap between political will, to see positive change occur, and our health system's ability to effect this change, is vital.

## **Esteemed Guests,**

It is my sincere belief, that unless we all embrace sustainability, autonomy, self-provision, continental collaboration, and every other ask of our SDGs, we will keep counting, witnessing, suffering, from deaths, that science has long ago deemed avoidable.

Whose hands will bear the blood, of the preventable fatalities incurred?

Who will help dry the tears of families that - *as if some of the pain that scarred our continent was not heavy enough* - have to bury a loved one, a loved one that we, held clear recommendations, in this Oncology Commission and in some of our own research, on how to save?

## **Esteemed Guests,**

0 cervical cancer fatality on our continent is possible, therefore, it should be expected. No delays, no excuses.

Our Rwanda may not be the wealthiest financially, neither are we the most accomplished in the field of sustainable medicine. And yet, our story is indeed a hopeful one.

As you know, the main cause of cervical cancer is HPV.

Having inoculated over 90% of the girls aged 12 against HPV, consistently since 2011, means that a whole generation, will soon be protected from this cancer's venom, through the efforts of a few years of re-strategising, readjusting the puzzle pieces present on our table, and embracing fruitful partnerships.

We can do this together.

We must do this together.

We, absolutely, will do this together.

About 600 million women are waiting for just that.

**Dear Lancet, Dear Medical Professionals, Honourable Dignitaries, Excellencies Ambassadors,**

I promise to carry with me the wisdom, that this event is to enrich us all with, and the conclusions and calls to action from this Lancet Oncology Commission, to the Organisation of African First Ladies Gathering, on the sides of the United Nations General Assembly, set to take place in New York, in a few days.

I promise to join my sisters, in re-energizing our advocacy, our efforts, and hopefully, the approaches of our countries, in eradicating cervical cancer, and other NCDs.

Until next time, thank you all for your work, and for this kind, encouraging invitation today.

I see no choice but to hope; I see no choice but to commit.

Let's make this afternoon count!

Thank you.