

Cervical cancer; protect every woman



Ms Nyombii

Cervical Cancer: Every Woman has the Right to Prevention

Each year 500,000 women are diagnosed with cervical cancer globally, of whom nearly 85% live in low-income countries

where access to routine health-care is limited. 270,000 of these will lose their lives to the disease. In Uganda, over 80% of women with cervical cancer are diagnosed with advanced disease. They occupy almost one-third of gynecological beds at Mulago National Hospital, and account for over 40% of radiotherapy patients. Cancer patients are stigmatised in society. They often do not go to health facilities, but stay home and die painfully.

Although remarkable progress has been made to reduce cervical cancer among women in the developed world through screening services and treatment, poorer countries have not shared these gains.

International Women's Day is an opportunity to assess women's global and national advancements in achieving equality, peace and development. As we mark March 8, representatives from the UN member states gather in

New York for the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) to discuss Financing for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women. Member States delegates pledge to increase resources to close the gap between rich and poor countries.

Today we have powerful tools that can reduce the risk of cervical cancer. We must make these tools available to women in the developing world. Many cervical cancer cases occur because standard screening services, such as Pap smears, are technically difficult and too expensive for widespread adoption in developing countries. Low-tech visual inspection methods provide a feasible alternative for early detection of cervical cancer.

Nearly all cervical cancer is caused by the Human Papillomavirus (HPV). The world now has HPV vaccines that can potentially prevent up to 70% of cervical cancers among vaccinated women. These vaccines could play an extremely important role in primary prevention of cervical cancer. However they are currently unaffordable in low-income countries.

It is an unfortunate fact that new health interventions often take many years to reach the people who need them most. With the HPV vaccine, Uganda is taking an important first step to learn about speedy and effective delivery to its young women and girls who need the vaccine.

In partnership, the government of Uganda and the international NGO PATH are studying strategies to reach girls with the HPV vaccine, and for linking vaccine deliv-

ery to other youth health services. The project will involve vaccinating girls in Ibanda and Nakasongola districts using a vaccine licensed in many countries, including Uganda.

Project implementers are working closely with all stakeholders to ensure their support and participation in HPV vaccine introduction. It is our hope that this project will pave the way for national roll-out of the HPV vaccine. This dream will not be realised, however, unless the vaccine is made available at an affordable price. Without broad access to HPV vaccines and effective low-cost screening tools, it is projected that by 2050 more than a million women will suffer cervical cancer annually.

We call upon everyone both nationally and internationally to raise their voices to prevent cervical cancer in the developing world. Civil society groups can mobilise communities. Policy leaders can make decisions on providing interventions in their countries. Global players including pharmaceutical companies, the GAVI Alliance, and other donor agencies can enact innovative strategies for making prevention tools affordable and accessible in developing countries.

We must reduce health inequities between the rich and the poor. A significant first step is being taken in Uganda, but much more must be done. Every woman in the world has the right to prevention. Given the tools that are available, even one cervical cancer death is too many.

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Honourable Sarah Nyombii, on behalf of Uganda Parliamentarians