



OPENING REMARKS OF HER EXCELLENCY MRS
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Fireside Chat of First Ladies



MAY 5, 2023

**Excellencies First Ladies,
Honourable Guests,
Ladies and Gentlemen of the Commonwealth,
All protocols observed,**

Good day.

- Little under a year ago, Rwandans had the pleasure of hosting many of you in Kigali, during the last Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting.
- One of the primary topics at hand was Women's Health, and specifically cervical cancer.
- Today, we get to have a crucial re-assessment of our respective trajectories.
- I am thankful for this space.

- Yes, it seems only fitting now, that we are in the Commonwealth capital of the world, to revisit this vital conversation through lessons learnt, and solidarity renewed by our shared presence.

Honourable Guests,

- **The power of solidarity has proven itself formidable, throughout History.**
- It will need to be victorious once more.
- Health disparities across the world, and indeed the commonwealth, currently refute our multi-nationed sense of community.
- How would we explain to future generations, that the disparities were unbeatable, when we all share the great values of the Commonwealth, for the betterment of our communities?
- Resolve will scrape this task from our fates.

- Solidarity. Community. Common. Wealth. Must and will prove themselves stronger than preventable diseases.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

- Allow me to contextualize Rwanda's position briefly.
- Rwandan women are centred in all aspects of our lives.
- Their presence in high-level positions of leadership, floats above 50 percent in our ministries, and 61 percent in our parliament.
- These numbers are indicative of a few things.
- Firstly, that Rwandans know how pivotal and crucial the contribution of women is in governance, and all other aspects of society and community. Our country knows it needs its women to thrive, to thrive itself.

- Secondly, women are now in positions, to advance the causes that primarily affect them, alongside those that affect men. One such worthy cause, is the allocation of gender-sensitive strategies and budgets – a typical challenge of systems, that fail or refuse to centre women.
- We acknowledge, that having women in these high-level, decision-making positions, allows for the full recognition of gender sensitive issues, where they were once overlooked, minimized, or simply misunderstood.
- As a result, we have been able to take bold steps in eliminating cervical cancer as a Public Health problem, as early as 2030. For this, we are grateful.

Distinguished audience,

- Allow me to share a few figures. Since the launch of our national HPV vaccine programme in 2011, we have witnessed a coverage of 90% of our population of young girls, since its introduction.

- The past 5 years were also marked by 30% of eligible women screened for cervical cancer. The treatment of precancerous lesions was decentralized, allowing 92% of women in need, to receive treatment at the level of primary health care facilities.
- All in all, while there is considerable room for growth, and a single cervical cancer fatality remains one too many in these modern times, there is cause for joy too, because of the progress secured thus far.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

- I am genuinely hopeful today, as the only acceptable choice before us here, **Honourable Guests, Dear Fellow First Ladies** is **immediate, rapid action**.
- We need not be experts in fields of science, or philanthropists with infinite funds.

- Advocacy and the expansion of awareness in itself, combined with the willingness to have these important conversations and drive the necessary campaigns, can be splendid catalysts of change.
- Furthermore, the Global Cervical Cancer Elimination Strategy paves the way to a permanent resolution of this pressing issue.
- We can, **Ladies and Gentlemen**, tackle the components to the prevalence of this disease in our countries, one by one.
- Perhaps we can start doing so, with one simple task: asking ourselves if we can visualize the fairest situation, for all of us - one in which all member states of our Commonwealth, benefit from equitable access to life-saving screenings, medicine and vaccines, at the same rate as every other nation, regardless of income classifications.
- I invite you all to picture greater domestic investments in health, more systematic use of our medical systems

for adherence to a culture of regular and exhaustive check-ups, in more advanced treatment centres.

- Indeed, I invite you all to visualise a Commonwealth in which the costs of HPV vaccines and HPV DNA tests are more affordable, so this preventable cancer is no longer a death sentence for our dear mothers and daughters.

Distinguished Guests, Sisters, Friends, Allies,

- Don't we owe the next generations to make this vision a reality, while tapping into the unmatched power of strong partnerships, beyond borders?
- I humbly believe we are ready to do the work together.
- We have the skills. We have the will. Together, we indeed have the wealth.
- Thank you for your time and kind attention, but most importantly, thank you for your efforts.

- Thank you for your dedication to women's health. While frequently overlooked, without women's health, there is no life, from which can stem, any common wealth.
- So, **Dear Guests**, may your resolve never waiver.
- I wish you, **Ladies and Gentlemen**, a wonderful day, and, for the state of women's health in our respective countries, a hopeful future.
- Thank you.