

Maintaining Essential Cervical Cancer & Sexual and Reproductive Health Services during the COVID-19 Crisis: *A Call to Action*



Pandemics such as COVID-19 can harm the safety and wellbeing of girls and women. We are already witnessing particular challenges to the health, safety and wellbeing of women and girls worldwide. We call on global partners worldwide to maintain provision of essential sexual and reproductive health (SRH) services for girls and women. In countries where cervical cancer prevention services are unavailable due to the COVID-19 pandemic, we call for their return when it is safe and feasible to do so.

In many countries, the COVID-19 crisis is now limiting access to essential health services for girls and women. Resources for essential SRH services must be protected as the world contends with the COVID-19 pandemic. Even as we fight to preserve the continuity of these essential health services, we also must not lose focus on the broader health needs of girls and women. Reducing access to the human papilloma virus (HPV) vaccine denies girls protection against HPV-related cancers as adult women. Reducing access to screening and treatment services threatens hard-won

progress against cervical cancer—a disease that the World Health Organization has targeted for elimination. Though cervical cancer prevention services may be temporarily sidelined, we must be prepared to support governments and health providers to make them available once the immediate threat of COVID-19 subsides, so that we do not lose the important health gains we have made to date.

Essential SRH services, such as safe delivery and emergency obstetric care, neonatal care, post abortion care, and access to contraception also require protection. Limited access to essential SRH services will be felt most acutely in low- and middle-income countries, where unacceptably high rates of unintended pregnancies, inadequate access to modern contraception, and maternal and newborn deaths persist.

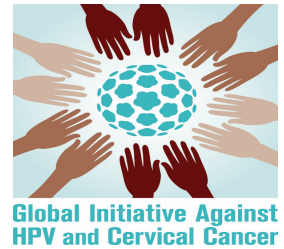
TogetHER for Health and its partners call on Ministries of Health, national programs and funders to maintain essential SRH services, to the greatest extent possible during this critical time so that global momentum in cervical cancer prevention, and SRH more broadly, are not lost.

We call for cervical cancer prevention programs to restart as soon as possible and hold that cervical cancer screening and treatment are essential SRH services that must be maintained during the COVID19 outbreak and into the future.

Specifically, we call for the following actions:

- Avoid repurposing SRH and cervical cancer resources—including laboratories, equipment, and personnel—for the COVID-19 response, if other options are available. Establish a clear timeline and plan for returning back to regular workstreams, recognizing that the epidemiologic context and timeline will be unique to countries.
- Embrace innovations that improve access to SRH and cervical cancer services without straining resources. Examples include: self-collection of HPV samples, use of digital platforms/telemedicine to communicate and provide clinical consultations for clients.
- Ensure health providers have access to training in infection control measures and the use of personal protective equipment (PPE), so that providers and patients are protected and health facilities are as safe as possible.
- Prepare and maintain safe places for girls and women to access essential SRH services. These places may be different than usual, as many health facilities need to be kept operational and safe for labor and delivery, urgent care, and other essential services.

Sustained access to essential SRH services must remain a priority as health systems continue to respond to COVID-19. We have a responsibility to the girls and women we serve to ensure that actions to address the coronavirus pandemic do not thwart long-term goals to improve women's health. Increases in cervical cancer morbidity and mortality are absolutely unacceptable, both now and in the future, when COVID-19 is eventually behind us. We look forward to working with Ministries of Health and other partners to ensure SRH and cervical cancer services emerge from this pandemic in tact and stronger than before.



Medical Women's Association of Zambia

GLOBAL FOCUS ON CANCER



FACES Lumumba Kisumu

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