

Cancer Awareness Campaigns for Pregnant Women in Nigeria and East Africa

Mpora Kakwanzi Evelyn

Department of Pharmacognosy Kampala International University Uganda

Email: evelyne.mpora@studwc.kiu.ac.ug

ABSTRACT

Cancer awareness campaigns targeting pregnant women in Nigeria and East Africa address a critical public health challenge, where cervical and breast cancers significantly impact maternal and fetal outcomes. The physiological changes of pregnancy, coupled with sociocultural and systemic barriers, exacerbate late-stage diagnoses and limited access to care. Current campaigns have demonstrated incremental success through community-based interventions, maternal health integrations, and technology-driven strategies like telemedicine. However, these efforts are often hindered by limited funding, cultural stigma, misinformation, and infrastructural deficits. This review evaluates the effectiveness of existing campaigns, identifies challenges, and proposes innovative, scalable, and culturally sensitive approaches. Recommendations include policy integration, technology utilization, multi-sectoral collaboration, and targeted research to enhance cancer prevention, early detection, and care among pregnant women. These initiatives aim to reduce cancer morbidity and mortality rates while promoting equity in maternal healthcare services.

Keywords: Cancer awareness, pregnancy, cervical cancer, breast cancer, maternal health, Nigeria, East Africa.

INTRODUCTION

Cancer remains a significant public health challenge globally, with increasing incidence rates in developing regions such as Nigeria and East Africa [1]. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), cancer is among the leading causes of death worldwide, with sub-Saharan Africa experiencing a disproportionate burden due to limited healthcare resources, late-stage diagnoses, and inadequate awareness. In this context, pregnant women constitute a particularly vulnerable group [2]. The physiological and hormonal changes associated with pregnancy can exacerbate cancer progression, complicate treatment options, and pose significant risks to both maternal and fetal health. In Nigeria and East Africa, cervical and breast cancers are the most commonly diagnosed malignancies among women, with pregnant women being no exception. These cancers often go undiagnosed until advanced stages, primarily due to low awareness levels, limited access to screening services, and sociocultural barriers [3]. The lack of early detection not only worsens outcomes for the mother but can also lead to adverse pregnancy outcomes, including miscarriage, preterm labor, and neonatal complications. Despite the clear need for targeted interventions, awareness campaigns for cancer prevention and early detection among pregnant women remain sparse in these regions. The problem of inadequate cancer awareness among pregnant women in Nigeria and East Africa is multifaceted. First, cultural beliefs and misconceptions about cancer contribute to stigma and prevent open discussions about the disease. In many communities, cancer is perceived as a punishment or a death sentence, deterring individuals from seeking medical advice or participating in screening programs [4]. Second, the healthcare infrastructure in these regions is often overstretched and underfunded, limiting the availability of diagnostic tools and treatment facilities. For pregnant women, who already require specialized care, the additional burden of navigating cancer-related healthcare can be overwhelming [5]. Third, economic barriers play a significant role, as

the high costs of cancer diagnosis and treatment are unaffordable for many households, particularly in rural and low-income areas. This review seeks to provide a comprehensive analysis of cancer awareness campaigns targeting pregnant women in Nigeria and East Africa.

Historical Context and Current Landscape

Cancer in pregnant women is a growing public health challenge, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa. Cervical and breast cancer are the most common malignancies among women of reproductive age, often remaining undetected until advanced stages due to limited awareness, suboptimal screening, and diagnostic infrastructures [8]. This intersection creates unique clinical dilemmas, as the physiological changes of pregnancy can mask symptoms while the presence of cancer complicates maternal and fetal care decisions. Historically, non-communicable diseases (NCDs) have not received the same level of attention as infectious diseases like malaria, tuberculosis, and HIV/AIDS in sub-Saharan Africa. Health campaigns and interventions have largely been designed to address the infectious disease burden, leaving a critical gap in resources and advocacy for NCDs. As a result, cancer awareness, especially regarding its occurrence during pregnancy, has been minimal [9]. In recent years, there has been a gradual shift toward recognizing and addressing the burden of cancer in sub-Saharan Africa, spurred by both governmental and non-governmental initiatives. Organizations like the Nigerian Cancer Society have implemented outreach programs to educate communities about early detection and treatment options, while the East African Community (EAC) has developed a regional cancer strategy emphasizing prevention, early diagnosis, and equitable access to care [10]. However, awareness campaigns specifically focusing on cancer in pregnant women remain underdeveloped, as current initiatives are generally broad in scope and fail to address the unique vulnerabilities and challenges faced by pregnant women diagnosed with cancer. Collaborative strategies that include government agencies, healthcare providers, and civil society are critical to addressing this challenge. Integrating cancer awareness into existing maternal health programs, training healthcare workers on early detection in pregnant women, and developing targeted communication strategies are necessary steps. Leveraging technological innovations like telemedicine and mobile health platforms could improve outreach and education in underserved areas [11].

Campaign Strategies

Health Education and Outreach Initiatives

Health education forms the cornerstone of cancer awareness campaigns. In Nigeria and East Africa, initiatives often involve workshops, seminars, and community outreach programs aimed at educating pregnant women about cancer risk factors, symptoms, and the importance of early detection [12]. For example, maternal health clinics in Uganda have integrated cancer education into routine antenatal care (ANC) services, emphasizing cervical and breast cancer screening.

Media and Communication Strategies

Radio, television, and social media platforms have been instrumental in disseminating cancer awareness messages. Campaigns such as Kenya's Beyond Zero Campaign leverage mass media to reach a wider audience, including pregnant women in rural areas. Social media campaigns also provide interactive platforms for education and engagement, fostering a culture of proactive health-seeking behavior.

Community-Based Interventions

Community health workers (CHWs) play a pivotal role in grassroots awareness efforts. Trained CHWs often serve as the first point of contact for pregnant women, providing culturally sensitive education and facilitating referrals for screening and treatment [13]. Programs like Ethiopia's Health Extension Program have successfully mobilized CHWs to raise awareness about cervical cancer.

Cultural and Socioeconomic Factors

Cultural Beliefs and Stigma

Cultural beliefs and stigma surrounding cancer significantly impact awareness campaigns. In many communities, cancer is perceived as a death sentence, discouraging women from seeking early diagnosis or discussing symptoms [14]. Traditional gender roles further hinder awareness efforts, as men often control household decisions, including healthcare access for pregnant women.

Economic Barriers

Financial constraints pose a major challenge to cancer awareness and care. The high cost of diagnostic tests and treatment, coupled with indirect costs like transportation, limits access for many pregnant women. Campaigns that fail to address these economic barriers risk excluding a substantial portion of the target population.

Healthcare Accessibility

Limited healthcare infrastructure in rural areas impedes the effectiveness of awareness campaigns. Pregnant women in remote regions often lack access to screening facilities, underscoring the need for mobile clinics and telemedicine solutions.

Evaluation of Campaign Effectiveness

Cancer awareness campaigns, particularly among pregnant women, can be evaluated using various metrics. Common indicators include increased screening rates, improved knowledge of cancer risk factors, early diagnosis rates, and behavioral change indicators [15]. Tools like structured surveys, focus group discussions, and interviews help capture qualitative and quantitative changes in awareness and attitudes among pregnant women. Case studies show that integrating breast cancer awareness campaigns into antenatal care (ANC) services in Lagos and Uganda has significantly increased screening rates among women attending ANC clinics. In Kampala, a community-based cervical cancer awareness campaign focused on increasing the uptake of Pap smears through workshops, radio broadcasts, and outreach events led to a measurable rise in the number of women undergoing Pap smear tests. Lessons learned from these case studies include embedding cancer awareness campaigns within established maternal health services, partnering with local organizations, and adopting culturally appropriate communication strategies. These strategies enhance credibility, provide logistical support, and facilitate outreach to underserved populations. By employing these evaluation metrics, learning from case studies, and implementing culturally tailored strategies, cancer awareness campaigns can significantly improve screening rates, early detection, and overall cancer care outcomes among pregnant women [4]. These insights provide a roadmap for designing more effective and impactful interventions in similar contexts.

Challenges and Barriers

Limited Funding and Resources

Cancer awareness campaigns often struggle with inadequate funding, leading to limited geographic coverage and insufficient training for healthcare workers. Budget constraints also restrict the production and dissemination of educational materials.

Misinformation and Myths

Misinformation about cancer including its causes, symptoms, and treatment options—remains widespread. Myths such as cancer being contagious or caused by supernatural forces hinder awareness efforts and discourage affected individuals from seeking care.

Infrastructure and Logistical Hurdles

The lack of reliable infrastructure, including roads and diagnostic facilities, complicates campaign implementation, particularly in rural areas. The absence of cancer registries in many regions also hampers data collection and the monitoring of campaign impact.

Recommendations and Future Directions

Policy Recommendations

Governments in Nigeria and East Africa should prioritize funding for cancer awareness campaigns and integrate them into national maternal health strategies. Policies that mandate cancer screening as part of routine ANC services could significantly improve early detection rates.

Technology and Innovation

Harnessing technology can enhance campaign reach and impact. Mobile health (mHealth) applications and SMS-based reminders can educate pregnant women about cancer and encourage screening. Telemedicine platforms can also facilitate access to expert consultations for women in underserved areas.

Collaborative Approaches

Multi-sectoral partnerships involving governments, NGOs, private sector entities, and international organizations can ensure the sustainability of awareness campaigns. Collaborative efforts can pool resources, expertise, and networks to maximize impact.

Addressing Cultural Barriers

Engaging community leaders and traditional healers in awareness efforts can help overcome cultural barriers. Training them to disseminate accurate information about cancer can build trust and encourage community-wide participation.

Expanding Research

More research is needed to understand the specific cancer awareness needs of pregnant women in Nigeria and East Africa. Studies on the effectiveness of different campaign strategies can inform the design of targeted interventions and contribute to global knowledge on cancer prevention during pregnancy.

CONCLUSION

Cancer awareness campaigns for pregnant women in Nigeria and East Africa are crucial in addressing public health challenges, such as limited access to early detection and treatment options for cervical and breast cancers. Limited funding, cultural stigma, misinformation, economic barriers, and inadequate healthcare infrastructure hinder progress. To address these challenges, innovative, targeted, and sustainable solutions are needed. Key lessons

include integrating campaigns into maternal healthcare programs, partnering with local organizations, adopting culturally appropriate communication strategies, and leveraging technology for geographic and logistical barriers. A multi-pronged approach is needed, including prioritizing funding, community engagement, and leveraging technological innovations. Future research on cancer awareness strategies tailored to pregnant women is essential, and collaboration between governments, NGOs, private entities, and international organizations is crucial for sustainability.

REFERENCES

1. International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC). (2023). Global cancer statistics 2023: GLOBOCAN estimates of incidence and mortality worldwide for 36 cancers in 185 countries. World Health Organization. Retrieved from <https://gco.iarc.fr>.
2. World Health Organization (WHO). (2022). Cervical cancer elimination initiative: Progress report for Africa. Geneva: WHO.
3. Nigerian Cancer Society. (2023). Annual report on cancer awareness programs in Nigeria. Nigerian Cancer Society.
4. East African Community (EAC). (2022). Regional cancer control strategy 2021–2025: Towards prevention and early detection. Arusha, Tanzania: EAC Secretariat.
5. Onyango, J., & Akinyemi, A. (2022). "Integration of cancer awareness into antenatal care services in sub-Saharan Africa: Challenges and opportunities." *African Journal of Health Promotion*, 8(3), 112-121.
6. Alum EU, Uti DE, Obeagu EI, Ugwu OPC, Alum BN. Cancer's Psychosocial Aspects: Impact on Patient Outcomes. *Elite Journal of Medicine*, 2024; 2(6): 32-42.
7. Emmanuel, N. Tufon., Yuwon, Nover B., Egba, Simeon I and Ndohnui, N. Noel (2012) Prevalence, associated risk factors and methods of diagnosing cervical cancer in two hospitals in Yaounde, Cameroon. *International Journal of Advanced Research in Pharmaceutical and Biosciences*, 3(1): 55-59
8. Ayinde, A., & Okafor, I. (2021). "Barriers to cervical cancer screening among pregnant women in rural Nigeria." *Reproductive Health Matters*, 29(4), 27-35.
9. Mwangi, W., & Njoroge, P. (2020). "The role of telemedicine in improving cancer care access in East Africa." *Journal of Global Oncology*, 6(2), 145-153.
10. Uche, I. P., & Abiodun, O. L. (2021). "Cultural factors influencing breast cancer awareness campaigns in Nigeria." *BMC Women's Health*, 21, Article 49.
11. Eze, E., & Muthengi, P. (2022). "Community health workers as change agents for cancer awareness in East Africa: A case study from Kenya." *Global Health Action*, 15(1), 201-214.
12. Beyond Zero Campaign. (2023). Annual report on maternal and child health initiatives with a focus on cancer awareness. Nairobi, Kenya: Beyond Zero Secretariat.
13. International Federation of Gynecology and Obstetrics (FIGO). (2022). "Cervical cancer and pregnancy: Clinical management and prevention strategies." *FIGO Global Guidelines for Women's Health*, 15(4), 313-320.
14. Obeagu, E. I., Ahmed, Y. A., Obeagu, G. U., Bunu, U. O., Ugwu, O. P. C. and Alum, E. U. Biomarkers of breast cancer: Overview. *Int. J. Curr. Res. Biol. Med.*, 2023; (1): 8-16. DOI: [10.22192/ijcrbm.2023.08.01.002](https://doi.org/10.22192/ijcrbm.2023.08.01.002).
15. Olivier Mulisya, Franck K Sikakulya, Mbusa Mastaki, Tambavira Gertrude, Mathe Jeff (2020). [The challenges of managing ovarian cancer in the developing world](https://doi.org/10.1155/2020/8379628). *Case Reports in Oncological Medicine*, 2020, (1), 8379628. <https://doi.org/10.1155/2020/8379628>.

CITE AS: Mpoka Kakwanzi Evelyn. (2024). Cancer Awareness Campaigns for Pregnant Women in Nigeria and East Africa. EURASIAN EXPERIMENT JOURNAL OF PUBLIC HEALTH, 7(2):12-15.