

# Stigma hampering cervical cancer battle in India

May 10 2013, by Abhaya Srivastava

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Social stigma is harming attempts to combat cervical cancer in India where more women die annually of the disease than anywhere else in the world, a new report said Friday.

More than a quarter of cervical cancer deaths worldwide occur in India, representing 72,825 a year according to the [report](#) by the US-based Cervical Cancer Free Coalition, although African nations have higher [mortality rates](#).

Cervical cancer is the second largest killer of women in low- and middle-income countries and is a taboo subject in many conservative societies as it is linked to [sexual transmission](#), said the report.

"It is critical to educate the public on the importance of screening and to break down cultural barriers about discussing [sexual issues](#)," said Usha Rani Poli, a doctor at the MNJ Institute of Oncology in the Indian city of Hyderabad.

She urged dismantling of the cultural barriers that impede frank discussions over sex in the largely patriarchal and male-dominated Indian society.

India, China, Brazil, Bangladesh and Nigeria account for over 50 percent of the annual 275,000 cervical cancer deaths, said the report, which compiled data from multiple sources including the [World Health Organization](#).

Zambia has the highest mortality rate globally at 38.6 deaths per 100,000 women with India registering less than half that rate at 15.2 deaths.

By contrast, Australia, which has a strong [cervical cancer vaccine](#) immunisation programme, has the lowest death rate at 1.4, said the report to be formally launched Sunday to coincide with International Mothers' Day.

"Lack of awareness and deep-seated stigma associated with the disease pose significant barriers" to treatment access in many countries with high death rates, the report said.

Cervical cancer is "preventable", said coalition executive director Jennifer Smith, adding "we can dramatically reduce this disease through vaccination, screening and education".

The US group, based in Chapel Hill, North Carolina and funded by drug firms and other donors, chose 50 countries to provide a global snapshot reflecting geographic, economic and population variations.

"Unless women's groups and civil society join together to lead movements that break through stigma, patriarchy and other societal barriers, we will continue to see large numbers of deaths," the report said.

Doctors believe the disease can be prevented through better awareness.

"There are encouraging opportunities for prevention with breakthroughs in cervical cancer screening in low-resource settings," said gynaecologic oncologist Poli.

Zambia's Christine Kaseba, wife of President Michael Sata, called the nation's high [cervical cancer](#) mortality rate "shocking".

"We can change this by making life-saving vaccines available that almost entirely prevent the disease," Kaseba said.

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