

Celebrating the International Women's Day in Mahajanga: Creating awareness to promote equal rights to access health services

Every year on the 8th of March, people all over the world come together to celebrate women's achievements and to advocate for a change regarding women's rights. In Madagascar, the International Women's Day is a national holiday with celebrations in most larger cities including parades, speeches, performances, and awareness stands organized by various local women's associations. This year in Mahajanga, the Lab Group Fusco was a part of the festivities and organized a stand to raise awareness on cervical cancer and human papillomavirus (HPV).

In Madagascar, cervical cancer remains the most frequent case of cancer in the country and the most common cause of cancer deaths¹. In the Boeny region itself, 42.7% of women tested positive for HPV in 2021², however, little is known about the sexually transmitted virus and the risks associated with a long-term, high-risk HPV infection.



The Lab Group Fusco awareness-raising team at the Bord de la Mer in Mahajanga, Madagascar on International Women's Day, 2024.

During the event, the group handed out 1000 flyers, which described how HPV is transmitted how it can cause many different cancer types, especially cervical cancer. The flyer also explained what preventative measures exist and what women in Madagascar can do to protect themselves since the HPV vaccine is not currently available and cervical cancer screening is extremely limited. This included advocating for and promoting the introduction of primary



Attendees participate in stand activities including an HPV-Quiz (left) and pledging support for the fight against cervical cancer in Madagascar (right).

health care measures, as well as proper and consistent condom use – of which more than 5700 were passed out during the event.

The women at the event had the opportunity to test their knowledge on HPV (and their throwing skills) in a quiz game. Many also pledged to support the fight against cervical cancer.

When asked what women's day means to her, one attendee responded, "It's a day to show the

world that women are a pillar in the development of the country itself". She stated that if a vaccine against HPV would be available in the country, parents would be more than willing to have their children vaccinated regardless of their sex.

We are working together with the government to introduce the HPV vaccine in the countries and we believe that the fight against the virus will start in Madagascar soon!

¹ ICO / IARC. Madagascar: Human papillomavirus and related cancers, Fact Sheet 2023. Fact Sheet. 2023; https://hpvcentre.net/statistics/reports/MDG_FS.pdf

² Kutz, et al. 'Female Genital Schistosomiasis, Human Papilloma Virus Infection, and Cervical Cancer in Rural Madagascar: A Cross Sectional Study'. *Infectious Diseases of Poverty* 12, no. 1 (25 September 2023): 89. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40249-023-01139-3>