By Jejje Muhinde;

Leading experts have called on governments to accelerate cervical cancer elimination efforts across the Commonwealth.

The call was made by researchers, policymakers, academics, advocates, civil society and political leaders gathered in Kigali for the first time since the pandemic, to discuss the current challenges, priorities, and strategies for cervical cancer elimination across the Commonwealth.

The event, which took place on the margins of the Commonwealth Women's Forum, focused on the theme "Accelerating Cervical Cancer Elimination: Realities, Challenges, and Opportunities", and sought opportunities to expand the role of women leaders to be advocates for elimination.

Delegates recognized the fact that the Commonwealth carries a significant cervical cancer burden, particularly in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs).

The Commonwealth members account for 40 per cent of global cervical cancer incidence and 43 per cent of cervical cancer mortality.

In her opening remarks, Dr Ruth Kattumuri, Senior Director of the Economic, Youth, and Social Policy Directorate at the Commonwealth Secretariat, stressed the urgent need for governments and health professionals to work together towards its elimination.

She said that, globally, cervical cancer is currently among the most pressing threats to women's health. Of the four cancers affecting women globally, cervical cancer is the only one that has proven effective elimination strategies through the Human Papillomavirus (HPV) vaccine and early screening tools for pre-cancerous lesions.

"Unfortunately, progress has been slow because many low- and middle-income countries are experiencing challenges with access to screening tools and HPV vaccines,"

In addition, she added that stigma and misconceptions surrounding cervical cancer is high, hence there is an urgent need to work together to eliminate cervical cancer.

Dr. Kattumuri proposed that it requires bold strategic policies and actions by governments, health professionals, and community organizations, involving women

and youth in health advocacy, to improve awareness and address access challenges.

It is estimated that one woman will die of cervical cancer every three minutes if no action is taken by 2030.

Dr. Princess Nono Simelela, Assistant Director-General for Family, Women, Children, and Adolescents at the World Health Organization (WHO), underscored the need for collective action to achieve the Commonwealth's elimination targets by 2030 and achieve vaccine inequity in countries where the cancer burden is the highest. She said:

"We really should be very angry that in the 21st century we are still talking about women dying of cervical cancer when we have the tools, technology, and know-how [to eliminate it].

Although cervical cancer is one of the most preventable and treatable forms of cancer, significant obstacles to achieving elimination remain.

These obstacles include a lack of equitable access to quality medical countermeasures in LMICs and associated stigma and misconceptions about the disease at the community level.