

Profile:

Ms. Agnes Musonda
Pink Ribbon Red Ribbon secondee
Ministry of Health, Zambia



Since 2015, Pink Ribbon Red Ribbon has successfully employed a unique strategy for ensuring coordination and synergy with Ministries of Health in the countries where our partnership operates: in addition to supplying funds, technical expertise, equipment and supplies, and services, the partnership has monetarily supported embedding non-governmental cancer experts within ministries' staff in Ethiopia, Tanzania, and Zambia. Pink Ribbon Red Ribbon will also use this strategy as it expands operations to other countries.

Agnes Musonda is a Program Manager for Cervical and Breast Health Promotions in the Zambian Ministry of Health, and a Pink Ribbon Red Ribbon secondee, thanks to support from a Pink Ribbon Red Ribbon partner, the National Breast Cancer Foundation (NBCF). NBCF's contribution supports a Zambian NGO, the Centre for Infectious Disease Research in Zambia (CIDRZ), which sponsors Agnes' secondment. An NGO that sponsors a secondee "feels like it's part of and contributing to the workings of the government," Agnes explained in February 2017. The government gains a skilled expert who can highlight a neglected health issue, and generate support for addressing it – as Agnes has demonstrated with her work.

Prior to her secondment starting in 2015, Agnes worked as a program manager for breast and cervical cancer prevention at CIDRZ. She was interested in the secondment because of "the ability to sit at the Ministry of Health, gain insight into and participate in its operating system, and contribute to policy formulation and strategy implementation for health promotion across the health sector."

In her role within the Health Promotion Unit in the Cervical Cancer Prevention Program in Zambia (CCPPZ), Agnes strives to increase good health-seeking behaviors among individuals through community mobilization, sensitization, and raising awareness around prevention and early detection of breast and cervical cancer. To do so, she builds relationships and collaborates with community members who may function as gatekeepers for women who need health services.

For example, she works closely with tribal leaders. She also educates men as well as women on the need for women to seek breast and cervical cancer screening.



pink ribbon | red ribbon
A Global Partnership Fighting Women's Cancers

Chieftainess Mwase Mpangwe is one of the traditional leaders with whom the Health Promotion Team has collaborated. Following education and advocacy by

Agnes and her colleagues, 26 traditional advisors in the chieftom agreed to conduct meetings with their people to discuss the importance of cervical and breast cancer screenings for all eligible women of their individual villages. Screenings were then provided for free at three strategic screening sites. One woman in the chieftom who chanced upon a community education session was motivated to return for screening, and reported afterward to Agnes, “I am glad I came and I am really rushing to go and inform all my friends and neighbors that there’s nothing to be scared about the screening process.”

Agnes has been successful not only in building demand among women for the health system’s offerings on women’s cancers, and ensuring that they are socially supported to seek services, but also in raising awareness among Ministry of Health staff, provincial health directors, and others that women’s cancers are an important health issue to be addressed. She has worked tirelessly on message development on cancers, and is proud of “bringing breast and cervical cancer stakeholders together to work on a common agenda for the first time.”

She values “the ability to work at the national level at the headquarters where most policies, guidelines, and decisions are made regarding women’s cancers.” Though she enjoyed her implementation role at CIDRZ before her secondment, she is now eagerly learning new skills including formulating policies, and working with other stakeholders beyond the Ministry of Health, such as international donors, and service delivery organizations. She appreciates the wide network that she has gained by being inside the ministry, and the respect that people grant her as a ministry representative.

Agnes recognizes that there are many areas in which greater governmental attention would improve programs to address women’s cancers. In particular, she cited the need for standardized health promotion guidelines on breast and cervical cancer, and a written national training manual on advocacy for breast and cervical cancer. She seeks a more active role for the National Cancer Control Technical Working Group and the National Health Promotion Technical Working Group, which consist of all governmental and non-governmental partners working on those issues in Zambia. The Working Groups have the potential to streamline activities, highlight the need for additional funding, clarify agendas and align them with the ministry’s goals, and bring various partners together to improve implementation. Making these Working Groups more functional and interactive is Agnes’ next goal.

Almost all the ministry staff treat Agnes like one of their own, appreciating the opportunities both to learn from her and to allow her to learn from them. “Being there makes you understand the system and see how best you can work within the system,” she stated. “When you are there, you have access to support in things like advocacy and planning. Doors are open.”

“Every day is a great work experience here at the Ministry of Health,” according to Agnes, who is grateful for “the opportunity to share my expertise at the national level.”