

The power of a testimonial: How a caretaker's story is shaping the future of HPV vaccination in Garissa



In a modest meeting room in Garissa, a group of community leaders sat in quiet anticipation. The Centre for Behaviour Change and Communication (CBCC), in partnership with UNICEF, had organized a social advocacy meeting to discuss the importance of the Human Papillomavirus (HPV) vaccine in preventing cervical cancer. Among the invited speakers was a man whose story would resonate deeply with everyone in the room—a caretaker of a cervical cancer survivor who had experienced firsthand the devastating effects of the disease.

As he stood before the gathering of county leaders, primary school headteachers, religious leaders, and representatives from various community groups, the caretaker began to recount his journey—a journey marked by sacrifice, loss, and an unyielding determination to care for his ailing mother.

His mother had been diagnosed with cervical cancer several years ago, a diagnosis that would change the course of his life. “When we first heard the news, it felt like the ground under us would sink,” he began, his voice steady but full with emotion. “Cervical cancer was something we had heard of, but never imagined would touch our family.” Augustus narrated.

As the eldest son in a family of two, the responsibility of caring for his mother fell squarely on his shoulders. He spoke of the difficult decisions he had to make—decisions that cost him dearly. His wife, overwhelmed by the burden of caring for her mother-in-law, eventually left him. “She couldn’t bear the weight of it all,” he said, pausing briefly as the memory of that painful chapter surfaced. “I don’t blame her. The strain was too much for any one person to bear.” He further recounted.

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The challenges did not stop there. As a trained P1 teacher, he had been employed at a local primary school, but his professional life began to unravel as his mother's condition worsened. "I had to ask for compassionate leave days repeatedly to take her to the treatment center," he explained. "At first, my boss was understanding, but eventually, it became clear that I couldn't continue working and be there for my mother at the same time." Ultimately, he lost his job, a loss that compounded the financial and emotional strain on his family.

"When you're faced with losing someone you love, you do whatever it takes,"

Now, as his mother's primary caregiver, he is responsible for ensuring she receives the treatment she needs at a nearby cancer treatment center. The weight of this responsibility is immense, but it is one he carries with quiet strength. "When you're faced with losing someone you love, you do whatever it takes," he said. "But I don't want any other family to go through what we have."

As the caretaker's story unfolded, the room grew silent, the gravity of his words sinking in. For the community leaders present, this was not just another discussion about health policies or vaccination rates. This was a raw, real-life account of the human cost of cervical cancer—a cost that could be mitigated by ensuring that the next generation is protected through vaccination.

The response from the community leaders was immediate. There was a palpable shift in the room as the leaders began to acknowledge the devastating effects of cervical cancer. The story had touched them in a way that statistics and data never could.



Augustus Mwanzai during the social advocacy meeting in Garissa

It was clear that the testimonial had moved the leaders to reconsider their stance on the HPV vaccine and its importance in safeguarding the health of young girls in Garissa. In the days following the meeting, several leaders who had been hesitant about promoting the HPV vaccine began to take a more active role in advocating for its uptake. The testimonial had served as a catalyst for change, highlighting the urgent need to increase vaccination rates to prevent future cases of cervical cancer.

This meeting was a turning point for the HPV vaccine campaign in Garissa. It underscored the power of personal stories in driving social change, especially in communities where health initiatives often struggle against cultural resistance and misinformation. The caretaker's story was a reminder that behind every statistic is a human life—a life that could be saved by a simple act of prevention.

As the CBCC in collaboration with UNICEF continue the efforts to increase vaccine coverage, the influence of this one caretaker's voice will be felt across the community. His willingness to share his painful journey has honoured his mother's struggle. The power of his testimonial lies not just in the story itself, but in its ability to inspire others to take action