

MALAWI HUMAN RIGHTS COMMISSION



MEDIA RELEASE

A CALL FOR ACTION ON MENTAL HEALTH ISSUES

Every year on 10th October, the world commemorates the World Mental Health Day. The overall objective of this Day is to raise awareness and mobilize efforts in support of mental health issues around the world. The Day also provides an opportunity for all stakeholders working on mental health issues to share and discuss their work on what needs to be done to make mental healthcare a reality for people worldwide. The 2021 Commemoration is centred around the theme; *'Mental Health in an Unequal World'*

Mental health is one of the most neglected areas of public health. About 1 billion people are living with mental disorders; three (3) million people die every year from the harmful use of drugs and alcohol, and one person dies every 40 seconds by suicide. Social stigma, discrimination, and human rights abuses of people with mental health conditions and/or psychosocial disabilities further precipitates the situation of mental health disorders. Currently, the world is going through turbulent times of unprecedented impact of the Covid-19 pandemic.

During these exceptional times of the pandemic, many people are confronted with psychological problems related to isolation, anxiety, loneliness, frustrations, addictions, insecurities, depression fears and worry. These are, obviously, the resultant traits of the socioeconomic devastation that covid-19 has caused amongst the global population. Many have lost jobs or source of income, others have lost loved ones thereby increasing the levels of orphan hood, poverty and destitution at an alarming rate.

It is undeniable that Covid-19's impact of people's mental health has indiscriminately affected everyone. However, much of the effects can be traced in some groups, including health and other frontline workers, students, people living alone, persons with disabilities and those with pre-existing mental health conditions. COVID-19 has exacerbated pre-existing challenges. The lack of psychotropic drugs in the country was worsened by the pandemic. Users of mental health services experiencing longer periods of inability to access medication made worse by the economic inability to access private pharmacies. This has led to an increase of symptoms experienced, relapses, and suicides.

Sadly, Malawi has recently experienced a sudden rise of suicide cases the majority of which involve men. There may be several factors including high levels of unemployment attributing to this shocking increase. Traditionally, expressing emotional distress or sharing one's problems is regarded as a feminine character and most men have opted to suffer in silence to avoid being considered weak. It is also a fact that as a country we have not invested adequately in mental health and as such we are seriously lagging behind in the provision of community-based psychosocial support services, the backbone of promoting mental health.

It is critical to note that mental health, just like any other public health issue, is a human rights concern as enshrined under Chapter IV of the Republican Constitution specifically bordering on the right to life, human dignity and non-discrimination of its general populace. Again, section 13 of the Constitution provides for principles of national policies obligates Government to provide adequate health care, commensurate with the health care needs of Malawian society and international standards of health care.

The Commission, therefore, calls upon the Government to proactively take steps towards addressing challenges towards improving Mental health care by training adequate mental health personnel and making sure that mental health issues are given a priority through allocation of adequate financial resources. The commission calls for increased research into mental health, in 2020 and 2021, we have noted unprecedented numbers of suicide being recorded in the media and we may never know the magnitude until serious research is conducted in this area. The commission further call upon the government to ensure that the mental health bill that is currently under review promotes all rights especially legal capacity for persons with mental health disorders and/or psychosocial disabilities. The Commission also calls for everyone to participate in the campaign towards improving the mental health sector and also support all those affected with mental health issues.

Signed



Scader Louis

CHAIRPERSON

Dated this 11th day of October 2021