UNTREATED MINDS: HOW MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES ARE FAILING MILLIONS OF NIGERIANS

Mental health has long been a neglected issue in Nigeria, often overshadowed by more visible health challenges. Despite global discourses around mental health becoming more common, mental health services remain underfunded, misunderstood, and unavailable to millions of Nigerians.[1] With a population exceeding 220 million, Nigeria's mental health crisis is a silent epidemic that has been exacerbated by social stigma, economic hardship, underfunding, brain drain, dearth of mental health facilities, and inadequate learning infrastructure.[2] According to the World Health Organization (WHO), mental health is a state of mental well-being that enables people to cope with the stresses of life, realize their abilities, learn well and work well, and contribute to their community.[3] Mental health is not just the absence of illness but a fundamental component of overall well-being. It influences every aspect of our lives—from how we think and feel to how we interact with others and make decisions. When mental health services fail, they disrupt not only individuals but communities and societies at large.

The World Health Organization (WHO) reported that over 75% of individuals with mental health disorders in low- and middle-income countries, including Nigeria, receive no treatment at all.[4] Depression and anxiety are among the most widespread mental health conditions in Nigeria. It is also estimated that one in four Nigerians will experience a mental health disorder at some point in their lives, with common conditions including depression, anxiety, and substance use disorders.[5] Yet only a fraction of those affected ever receive the care they need. In 2017, approximately 7 million Nigerians, or 3.9% of the population, were affected by depressive disorders, while 4.9 million people, representing 2.7%, experienced anxiety disorders.[6]

In Nigeria, there is a substantial gap between the demand for mental health services and their availability. Mental health services are inadequate, with just about 300 psychiatrists serving the entire population—far below the WHO-recommended ratio of one psychiatrist per 10,000 people.[7] A lack of mental health facilities compounds this shortage of trained professionals. Nigeria has just nine federal psychiatric hospitals and five state Psychiatric Hospitals, with most of the existing mental health services concentrated in urban centers,

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[1] https://blogs.bmj.com/bmjgh/2024/05/26/mind-the-widening-gap-a-trauma-driven-mental-health-crisis-in-nigeria/

[2] https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC10988134/

[3] https://www.who.int/health-topics/mental-health#tab=tab_1

[4] https://www.who.int/health-topics/depression#tab=tab_1

[5] https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC8148654/

[6] https://iris.who.int/bitstream/handle/10665/254610/WHO-MSD-MER-2017.2-eng.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y

[7] Wada Y.H., Rajwani L., Anyam E., Kariakri E., Njikizana M., Srour L., et al., Mental Health in Nigeria: A Neglected Issue in Public Health. PHIP, 2021; 2.

with many rural areas lacking access.[8] The limited number of public health facilities providing mental health services in Nigeria are overwhelmed and underfunded, resulting in long wait times and inadequate resources. Mental health currently is funded by only 3.3-4% of the health budget.[9] Even when services are available, affordability remains a significant obstacle. The cost of mental health care is often beyond the reach of the average Nigerian, leaving many vulnerable individuals without the support they need. It is reported that only two percent of people with neuropsychiatric problems use mental health services in Nigeria.[10]

Stigma plays a significant role in exacerbating Nigeria's mental health crisis. In many communities, mental illness is still seen as a taboo subject, often linked to spiritual or supernatural causes. This leads to discrimination, isolation, and reluctance to seek care. Families often hide their loved one's conditions, preferring spiritual or traditional treatments over professional help. Investigations by Human Rights Watch have revealed that sometimes, these individuals are left chained up in unhygienic, overcrowded conditions, drugged, starved, and physically abused.[11] This stigma also extends into the healthcare system, where health workers who are not adequately trained reinforce harmful beliefs, further discouraging individuals from seeking treatment and perpetuating a cycle of silence and suffering.[12]

Nigeria operated under the outdated Lunacy Act of 1958, which did not protect people suffering from mental illness until January 2023, when the Mental Health Bill was signed into Law.[13] This new law promotes human rights, protection, and access to services for people with mental disorders. However, passing a bill into law is only the first step. Implementation remains a major challenge. Without adequate funding, human resources, and political will, the law may not lead to meaningful change.

A key challenge to providing mental health services is the lack of comprehensive data on which the government can make informed decisions. Smaller research and anecdotal evidence suggest that mental health disorders are becoming more common. Still, Nigeria's

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[8] https://gamjireporters.news.blog/2021/05/25/only-2-percent-of-neuropsychiatric-patients-uses-mental-health-services-in-nigeria-dr-aishatu-armiyau/

[9]https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC9461161/#:~:text=The%20mental%20health%20budget%20mainly,Nigeria%20%5B3%2C4%5D.

[10] https://gamjireporters.news.blog/2021/05/25/only-2-percent-of-neuropsychiatric-patients-uses-mental-health-services-in-nigeria-dr-aishatu-armiyau/

[11] Human Rights Watch, Nigeria: People with Mental Health Conditions Chained, Abused. 2019. Accessed 3rd June 2022. Human Rights Watch

[12] Knaak S, Mantler E, Szeto A. Mental illness-related stigma in healthcare: Barriers to access and care and evidence-based solutions. Healthc Manage Forum. 2017 Mar;30(2):111-116. doi: 10.1177/0840470416679413. Epub 2017 Feb 16. PMID: 28929889; PMCID: PMC5347358.

[13] https://articles.nigeriahealthwatch.com/from-the-lunacy-act-to-the-first-mental-health-act-in-nigeria-fivetakeaways/#:~:text=In%20January%202023%2C%20a%20little,National%20Mental%20Health%20Act%2C%202021.

health system lacks the robust data infrastructure required to understand the scope of the issue adequately.

Nigeria's mental health crisis necessitates a concerted approach that prioritizes improving access, boosting awareness, and raising the bar for care. One of the primary efforts is to increase government funding for mental health services. The federal and state governments need to prioritize the financing of mental health services to ensure that every Nigerian can access them at an affordable price. This also means increasing the number of mental health institutions, particularly in impoverished areas, and providing funding for the training of mental health professionals.

As the country continues to evolve, it must recognize that mental health is not a peripheral issue but a fundamental pillar of the nation's overall well-being. When mental health problems go untreated, it doesn't just affect the individuals or families involved—it ripples out, impacting the economy and society as a whole. For a society to truly thrive, its people need good mental health. The new mental health law is a great step forward. Still, real progress will only happen if we continue to invest in making mental health care accessible to everyone, no matter where they live or their economic status.