

We should all care about mental health

A study on mental health among young women in Kampala's urban slums reveals that a staggering 74% of them aged 18-24, in informal settlements, suffer from at least one mental health condition, with 45% experiencing multiple conditions simultaneously. These statistics, which are from the research conducted by Makerere University College of Health Sciences in partnership with Uganda Youth Development Link, are likely the tip of the iceberg.

Why should we all care? Mental health is both a personal and national issue with deep societal consequences. We are likely witnessing a generation's potential being washed away when nearly three-quarters of young women in our communities struggle with depression, anxiety or suicidal thoughts. This state of affairs also threatens our social fabric, economic productivity and the future of many.

We suspect that this problem is almost certainly deeper than what the current data shows. For instance, we are still facing limited access to mental health services, pervasive stigma



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and inadequate screening, which means that hundreds of cases remain undetected and untreated. This is an emergency because of the dangerous interplay between the push and pull

factors. Poverty, gender-based violence and economic insecurity push young women towards despair, while cheaply available drugs and alcohol cause them to adopt destructive coping mechanisms.

Therefore, there is a need for immediate, co-ordinated action from all stakeholders led by the Government. Mental health services must be integrated into primary healthcare, particularly in underserved communities; community health workers should receive specialised training to identify and support those in distress, and campaigns should dismantle the harmful myths.

Within slums, we need community-based interventions: safe spaces for peer support, vocational training for economic empowerment and accessible counselling services. Churches, non-governmental organisations and women's groups that are already providing support need more resources. We could also address the root causes including creating economic opportunities. Also, mental health awareness should be prioritised in schools and workplaces nationwide.