

Mental health problems are global, with young people especially vulnerable



Panel at the WCC's World Mental Health Day Event. Photo: Peter Kenny/WCC

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Children are particularly vulnerable to post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), as their trauma often lasts long after a conflict has ended, says Ambassador Geert Muylle, permanent representative of Belgium to the UN in Geneva.

Muylle, vice president of the UN Human Rights Council, was speaking at a 5 October World Mental Health Day event titled, "International campaign: breaking the chains of stigma in mental health; restoring human dignity for persons with mental illness."

The event was held the Ecumenical Centre in Geneva and sponsored by Frascarita International, the World Health Organization (WHO), the World Council of Churches (WCC), the Fondation d'Harcourt and the Belgium government.

“Mental health disorders are a global development issue,” said the ambassador. “It is estimated that 10 percent of the world’s population, including 20 percent of children and adolescents, suffer from some sort of mental disorder.”

“Young people, who represent our world’s future, are especially at risk of a whole range of mental-health conditions as they transition from childhood to adulthood.”

Mental health disorders critical in conflict settings

He said although mental health disorders affect both high- and low-resource countries they are particularly critical in settings of conflict and violence.

“Human-made and natural disasters also add to people’s stress and mental instability,” Muylle noted.

World Mental Health Day is observed on 10 October and this year it focuses on “psychological first aid”.

Dr Nyambura Njoroge, WCC project coordinator for Health and Healing began with a prayer: “God our creator...we invite you into our presence.... Some of us carry the burden of the different kinds of mental health. Some of us are caregivers to our loved ones....

“We commit ourselves into your care...so we hear your voice to give us the serenity to hear you....The stigma and shame that come with depression, the stigma that comes with death by suicide as a result of depression.....some us have walked that journey of stigma and shame. That is why we call upon you our God, to hear us, to guide us.”

Speakers from the WHO and the United Nations said that human rights abuses are common in both developed and developing countries.

Dainius Pūras, the UN special rapporteur on the right to health, said concerns remain about misuse and abuse of psychiatry that have different historical legacies in regions and sub-regions.

“The culture of mental health services in eastern part of Europe remains different from western part of Europe,” he said.

Pūras noted, “An unacceptably high number of children and adults with intellectual and psychosocial disabilities are living in large residential institutions.”

Prof. Dr Isabel Apawo Phiri, WCC associate general secretary, said, “The faith communities and institutions stay with and accompany the communities through thick and thin. They have done so, through the centuries.”

Phiri said, “It is also all too common that in most parts of the world, trained mental health professionals and psychiatric services are woefully inadequate to meet the growing need. We cannot underestimate the role faith communities can play.”

She stressed that the work of churches and faith communities is vital, whether it is to support communities facing natural disasters, rebuilding after conflicts, or preventing and coping with violence.

“The WCC and its ecumenical partners have historically and currently are committed to serve the mental wellbeing of the people and communities regardless of their religion,” said Phiri.

Community-level accompaniment

“In addition to the community-level accompaniment of the people in need, our members and our healthcare networks provide a substantial proportion of the healthcare needs in the neediest parts of the world,” she said.

Shekhar Saxena, director of Mental Health and Substance Abuse at the WHO, spoke of the role of the WHO saying it is to guide and support member states, offer technical assistance, and monitor the global mental health situation

“Mental health problems are an extremely important issue worldwide due to their impact on the human rights and quality of life of those affected and their families,” said Saxena, psychological first aid supports people in the aftermath of crisis events that are both large-scale and individual and occur in every community in the world.

He said large-scale events include natural disasters, war and terrorist attacks, disease outbreaks, large-scale displacement of people and communities while individual events affect one or a few people, such as accidents, robbery or assault.

“Psychological first aid is important, first-line psychosocial support for people affected by crisis events.”

Dr Mwai Makoka, WCC programme executive for health and healing, elaborated on how faith-based organizations are making a unique contribution to mental health in some countries.

Mission hospitals

“Mission hospitals represent a significant population of healthcare workers who also need mental healthcare from time to time and mission hospital and training schools provide an opportunity to scale up mental health awareness and service provision,” said Makoka.

He spoke of mental health in Malawi, where he comes from, and said the only hospital dealing with it was one central hospital converted from a colonial prison with no in-country training.

In 1993, St John of God started two modern hospitals dealing with primary, outreach and referral care in mental health with a training college offering post-basic training in psychiatric nursing, counselling and mental health.

Makoka cited African countries such as Liberia, Ghana, Democratic Republic of Congo, South Sudan, Kenya, Lesotho, Malawi, Uganda, Tanzania, Zambia and Zimbabwe, where Christian health networks make a significant contribution to their national health network.

Dr René Stockman, general superior of the Brothers of Charity and president of Fracarita International, detailed how the brothers have pioneered in the field of mental health since 1815. That was when, “the first Brothers of Charity ‘broke the chains’ of the psychiatric patients who were imprisoned” in Ghent.

They started in Belgium with mental health services and now the Brothers of Charity are in 30 countries with more than 150 projects in the field of mental health, education and disability care.

“Breaking the chains remains our task...breaking the chains of iron, but also the chains of stigmatization, the chains of exclusion and discrimination, the chains of all kinds of addiction,” says Stockman.

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