

For Immediate Release
April 6, 2023

Nigerian Mental Health Press Statement at National Press Conference on Mental Health Act & Next Steps Post-Nigeria's Elections

In honor of World Health Day, Civil Society Organizations outline 10-point agenda for effective implementation of the Mental Health Act and launch #SuicideNotCrimeNG, a campaign to decriminalize attempted suicide in Nigeria

INTRODUCTION

Nigerian Mental Health and its network partners have been leading coordination and advocacy for the passage of the National Mental Health Act 2021. On January 5, 2023, President Muhammad Buhari made history by signing the Mental Health Act into law, marking a major milestone in Nigeria's efforts to improve support for psychosocial well-being. The new Mental Health Act is the first legislative reform adopted in the field since the country's Independence.

The regulation establishes human rights protections for those with mental health conditions, such as banning discrimination in housing, employment, medical, and other social services. It guarantees that those receiving treatments have the right to participate in the formulation of their medical plans and cannot have forced treatment, seclusion, or other methods of restraint without appropriate safeguards. It also improves care, enhances the management of medical services, enshrines dignity and access to information, and ensures quality mental health services comparable to those with physical illnesses. Previous legislation was outdated and inhumane, based on a regulatory regime that had colonial origins.

To consolidate gains made by the Mental Health Act in advancing human rights, other critical efforts must be initiated as we embark on a new political dispensation post-Nigeria's 2023 recent presidential, national & state assembly, and gubernatorial elections.

NEXT STEPS TO ADVANCE THE MENTAL HEALTH ACT & ENSURE PSYCHOLOGICAL WELL-BEING IS A NATIONAL PRIORITY POST-ELECTIONS

- 1. Gazetted National Mental Health Act** — the National Assembly and the Federal Ministry of Health should ensure published copies of the National Mental Health Act 2021 are available to citizens. Currently, the official copy of the legislation is not easily accessible on any government website for public engagement and review. This legislation ushers in new legal protections for those with mental health conditions and should be readily available on trusted government portals to inform citizens of their new rights. In the

interim, a gazetted copy of the legislation will be available on Nigerian Mental Health's [website](#), along with the legislative history of the regulation and memoranda submitted during the public hearing to help guide implementation of the Act in the future.

2. **#SuicideNotCrimeNG** — other critical regulatory reforms for those with mental health conditions should be enacted, such as decriminalizing attempted suicide, which is illegal according to Nigeria's Criminal and Penal Codes and penalizes citizens with a one-year jail term. The World Health Organization notes that criminalizing suicide discourages people from seeking help for their mental health, which would be counterproductive to the effective dispensation of the Mental Health Act. Suicide should be treated as a public health issue, not a criminal one. Individuals who try to take their life are psychologically vulnerable and need support, not detention or jail. The public is encouraged to join thousands of others in adding their voice to repeal these laws by signing our [petition](#).
3. **New Administration Prioritize Mental Health** — Nigeria's 2023 general election cycle has ushered in a new crop of political officials to legislate and govern for Nigerian citizens. While many candidates discussed critical social development goals in manifestos and campaigns, their policy priorities often excluded specific attention to mental health. The right to health is enshrined through foundational documents such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which posits "the right to a standard of living adequate for health and well-being..." Health, however, is beyond physical, covering "a state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity" according to the World Health Organization. To deliver on Nigerian's well-being holistically, newly elected, and appointed officials should elevate mental health in their policies and programs.
4. **Increase Mental Health Budgeting** — As a percentage of Nigeria's signed 2023 budget, spending for health has increased from last year's budget of 4.7% to 4.9%, but the country's healthcare sector remains underfunded. Although progress is being made to improve funding, Nigeria has failed to meet the African Union's declaration to give 15% of the National Budget to the sector. Additionally, budgetary allocation to mental health in Nigeria is limited, fluctuating between 3% to 4% of the health sector budget. The Mental Health Act establishes a Mental Health Fund to provide financial resources for funding the legislation's provisions, but the Act does not specify the amount the Fund will contain or how it will be financed. There should be increased mental health parity as a percentage of the health budget and proper arrangements to ensure the Mental Health Fund has adequate fiscal resources.
5. **Nothing About Us Without Us** — Implementing and enforcing the National Mental Health Act should involve an implementation committee, including meaningful participation with the disability community and civil society. Mental health conditions are a leading cause of disability, according to the World Health Organization. Persons with psychosocial disabilities and their representative organizations know what is best for us and our community. We should be valued as integral and essential contributors to the Mental Health Act, and other policies that concern us. The legislation encourages this, mandating engagement in various ways of persons with lived experiences of mental health conditions. There should also be a consolidated focal point and information exchange

between key government agencies like the Federal Ministry of Health, National Commission for Persons with Disabilities, and other associated parastatals to help coordinate advocacy and mainstreaming of issues pertaining to those with psychosocial conditions.

6. **Inclusion of Diverse Actors** — many stakeholders are involved in the mental health field and are championing improved psychological well-being for Nigerians. These include psychiatrists, psychologists, social workers, nurses, pharmacists, occupational therapists, psychotherapists, lay counselors, disability specialists, persons with lived experiences, mental health advocates, and policy practitioners. This diversity of voices ranges from medical officials to activists, non-governmental organizations to professional associations, and others involved in the field. All of these stakeholders should continue to be acknowledged and carried along concerning implementation of the Mental Health Act and the provision of psychological well-being in Nigeria.
7. **Mainstream Psychosocial Support** — nearly 100% of funding for mental health in Nigeria goes towards psychiatric hospitals and drugs. We must expand our vision for how mental health is cared for to not just include biomedical approaches that emphasize mental conditions as brain diseases to be treated. Instead, we should expand mental health provisions to include increased funding and initiatives in psychosocial mental health practices that refer to a range of interventions and activities that focus on the psychological, social, and emotional well-being of individuals. These practices are often located at the local and community levels and range from support groups, yoga, music & art therapy, meditation, recreational sports, or other wellness approaches. They have a role in the prevention and the ancillary management of mental health conditions, and promote overall mental health and well-being.
8. **Define Clear Metrics for Mental Health Act's Success** — Nigeria has many policies, but with 1 in 8 Nigerians experiencing a mental health condition during their lifetime and only 10% getting access to care, according to the World Health Organization, this legislation cannot afford to fail. To ensure its success, clear criteria should be established at the onset to measure the impact of the legislation. This should include defined roles, timelines, and success metrics for effective monitoring and evaluation.
9. **Inclusion of Mental Health in Primary Health Centers** — The Mental Health Act prescribes the adoption of community-based approaches to the provision of mental health care services; this should involve the inclusion of mental health support as a service delivered at primary health care centers across the country. Resources such as mental health first aid and other basic assistance and support at the primary level will also serve as a preventive healthcare function for those at the grassroots.
10. **Domestication of the Mental Health Act** — the legislation should be adopted at the sub-national level as State governments are critical actors in the dispensation of healthcare for citizens. Currently, only two states — Ekiti and Lagos — have mental health legislation in the entire nation.

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Signed,

- 1. Nigerian Mental Health**
- 2. Association of Psychiatrist in Nigeria (APN)**
- 3. Association of Psychiatric Nurses of Nigeria (APNON)**
- 4. Nigerian Association of Clinical Psychologists (NACP)**
- 5. Association of Medical Social Workers of Nigeria (AMSWON)**
- 6. Joint National Association of Persons with Disabilities (JONAPWD)**
- 7. Mentally Aware Nigeria Initiative**
- 8. She Writes Women**
- 9. Neem Foundation**
- 10. Suicide Research & Prevention Initiative (SURPIN)**
- 11. Mandate Health Empowerment Initiative**
- 12. Mental Health with Ditty**
- 13. Friends Advocacy For Mental Health Initiative**
- 14. Jela's Development Initiatives**
- 15. The Sunshine Series**
- 16. Mind Over Matter NG**
- 17. Psychebabble Foundation**
- 18. Mental Health for Youth Initiative**
- 19. Mental Health Pathway**
- 20. Olamma Cares Foundation**
- 21. Emma Njoku Foundation**
- 22. OurBETALife Mental Health Foundation**
- 23. Gabi Williams Alzheimer's Foundation**
- 24. PAT Consulting Nigeria**
- 25. Serenity Mind Wellness**
- 26. You Are Not Alone NG**
- 27. Postpartum Support Network Africa**
- 28. Stilt Ng**
- 29. Anti Suicide and Depression Squad**
- 30. SaferPlace Africa**
- 31. Idimma Health Initiative**
- 32. The Sunshine Series-Mind Wellness**
- 33. Africa's Mental Health Matters**
- 34. Amaudo Integrated Community Mental Foundation**
- 35. Rayven Strategic Communications**
- 36. New Life Mental Health Relief and Care Initiative**
- 37. Nigeria-American Institute for Mental Health**
- 38. Sanctuary of Wellness**
- 39. Elite Life Consulting**
- 40. Siblings of Special Needs Foundation (SOSNEEDS Nigeria)**
- 41. Holistically NG**
- 42. Education Plus**
- 43. ILERA Community Health Initiative**
- 44. Institute of Counseling in Nigeria**