

Malawi Youth Mental Health Literacy: July 2022

Hello everyone,

This month's newsletter highlights a student project exploring the impact of COVID-19 pandemic on mental health of youth from African communities and profiles two individuals who supported delivery of our national survey.



Shahd Mekki was a Global Health master's student from [Queen Mary University of London](#). Supervised by Dr Jumbe, she collaborated with [Millennium University](#) to conduct her dissertation research which explored the psychological effect of COVID-19 in Malawi, Sudan and Africans living in the UK. In this study, African communities in the UK refer to Malawian/Sudanese diaspora in the UK. Considering the increased and alarming mortality and morbidity rates seen globally due to the COVID-19 pandemic, young people were highly vulnerable to mental health issues due to their increased vulnerability to depression, anxiety, and stress-related disorders. Shahd's research intended to add more evidence around impact of the pandemic on youth mental health due to limited number of existing published studies from Africa in this area.

She led some community engagement work with young people aged 18-24 years across Malawi, Sudan and the UK. Social media (Twitter and Facebook) was used as an advertising platform for her study, which yielded 25 participants. She used Zoom to do online focus group discussions with her participants during the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic, at a time when face to face meetings were halted. Shahd's study found that COVID-19 had a negative impact on several areas of young people's lives (see Figure 1) which highly contributed to increased mental distress among participants. To address these problems, participants suggested that there should be awareness programs and policy changes to help improve such dire scenarios especially to those classified as vulnerable. Finally, there should be strategies in place to ensure that if a similar situation of a global pandemic occurs, mental health services should be easily accessible especially to young people, who tend to be overlooked by government and those in positions of authority within society.

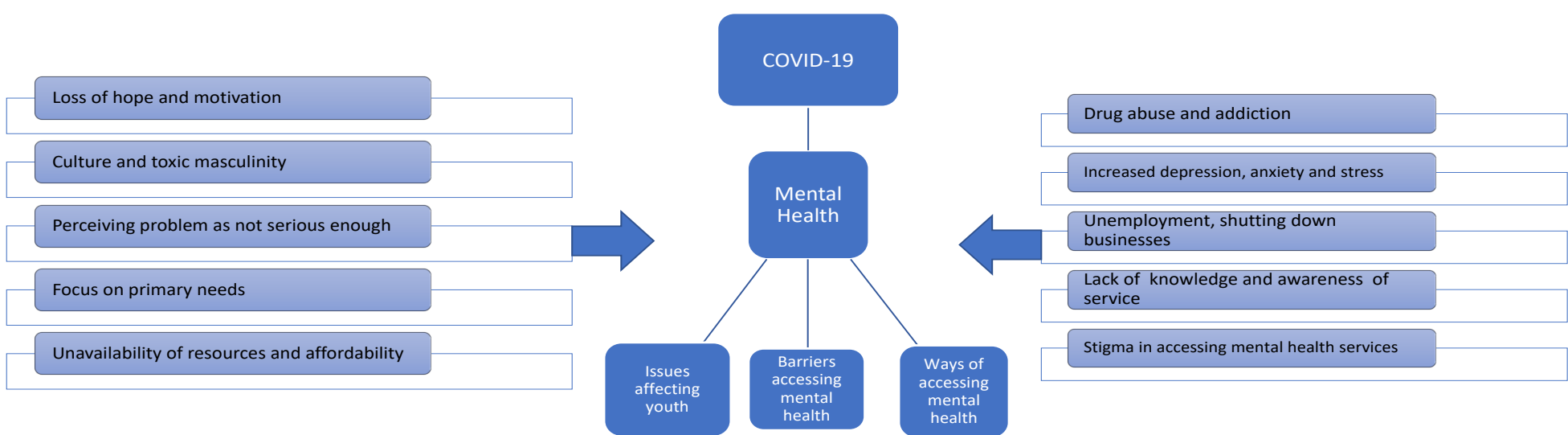


Figure 1 - Key themes

Shahd says “my vision was always to make an impact on the world around me, by doing work that makes people's lives better. My interdisciplinary background in Global Health has made me actively aware of the gaps in mental health research, especially in Africa. I have a strong passion for identifying the barriers and improving mental health services. This research has given me a wider lens of the existing hospitals in African communities and ways on how to improve and tackle them”



Gibson Chisale, is an activist, theatre artist and Director of [PACE for Social Change](#) a youth led organisation located in Mzuzu. It was inspired by Charles Kajoloweka, a human rights activist, and Executive Director for [Youth and Society](#). PACE runs several programs focused on child protection, supporting adult education and bursary, hygiene and sanitation and environment protection. PACE uses theatre and the media to bring about social change and awareness of critical issues affecting Malawians in everyday life. It originated from local drama group, Pacific Caramel Ensemble which nurtured their creativity that they express up to date.

He learnt about our Mental Health Literacy (MHL) project through a WhatsApp youth forum which contained an invitation to take part in the virtual MHL focus groups. He was also volunteered to facilitate data collection of the MHL survey, where he organised 50 youth from Mzuzu city as part of the respondents.

Gibson says that mental health issues are not taken seriously like other problems that we have. He has been longing to become a mental health advocate as mental illnesses are real issues that are affecting many of us within communities in Malawi. Increasing knowledge and one's expertise in mental health can bring about a significant impact on the community hence his motivation to be a part of our project. MHL has been of great importance to Gibson. He is a direct benefactor of it, as he suffered from depression before. After receiving help from experts, he realised he can also help other people if he became an expert in mental health.



Happy Chilima is a young, motivated man currently pursuing a diploma in Electrical Installation at Mzuzu Technical College. He has a passion for engineering and is a health advocate currently affiliated with [Nkhatabay Youth Friendly Health Service](#) as a volunteer. His health advocacy role is focused towards Sexual and Reproductive Health Rights (SRHR), as well as issues of general hygiene which were highly promoted during the coronavirus pandemic. The area of mental health was new to him as well as to the community he serves.

After some awareness training, he later understood what depression, anxiety and other related mental health problems were and the toll they are taking on Malawi's population. He observed the importance of counselling to address many issues within his community such as suicide cases among youth, low productivity, teen pregnancy and parenthood, and HIV related challenges. He acknowledges that MHL is important and must be promoted in all places beyond youth circles to help improve lives. Happy says “I have some friends in isolation and mostly the conclusion we give is judging them negatively without knowing what they are going through. The effects of our behaviour towards them and comments made by guardians are definitely discriminative. This is done unknowingly, all because we do not know much about mental health.”

This hardworking, humble and honest young man understands he has to play a role to help Malawi by first improving his community's ideologies on health as well through humanitarian support. His desires are to create positive change to make life better for others and create a better future for all, himself inclusive.

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