

## Malawi Youth Mental Health Literacy: May 2022

Hello everyone,

This month's newsletter highlights two individuals who supported delivery of our national survey. We also briefly cover a student project exploring mental health knowledge, stigma and services among Malawian youth.



**Nelson Zakeyu**, founder and executive director for Drug Fight Malawi (DFM), an NGO tackling the issue of alcohol and substance abuse, the first of its kind in Malawi. He is the first champion of our Youth Mental Health Literacy project. He and his team (James and Victoria) conducted the initial surveys in rural parts of Malawi's Northern and Central regions. They covered Mzimba, Mchinji and Kasungu, collecting the first batch of survey data which we used for our preliminary analyses (unpublished) that proved base validity and reliability of the survey questionnaire used. This data also informed Caitriona's project.

Nelson was motivated to start DFM, following the death of his younger brother to substance abuse. His brother's demise and his recognition of the growing harmful use of alcohol and substances by young people in Malawi made him realise he had to solve this problem.

Nelson states the importance of mental health by pointing out its "causal effect" on substance abuse and also links issues of vandalism, suicide and other criminal activities as results of an individual having mental health issues. Nelson is a man who can be described as very passionate and humble, who does not want to see others suffer. He has never tasted alcohol or smoked any substance in his life and is a cool God-fearing man. This self-aspired man spearheaded the development of the National Alcohol Policy of Malawi, heading each activity to ensure it happens, involving the government and all necessary stakeholders in the process. For more information of his organization, go to DFM's Facebook page. [DFM Facebook](#)

**Emmanuel Kanzimbi**, who works as communications officer for [Phalombe Youth Arms Organisation \(PYAO\)](#), is another stakeholder who was involved in collecting data for the MHL project national surveys. PYAO looks at aspects of health, good governance, environment, focusing on irrigation and job creation to enhance entrepreneurship among youth. They also empower young women with kids to start business so that they can support themselves and encourage youth to voice out their concerns to authorities. The organization is locally run and funded, surviving on short term project-based donors. Emmanuel was flagged to us by [NYCOM](#) and was involved in our initial focus groups that informed focus of the MHL national survey. He engaged communities in both rural and suburban areas, getting 50 respondents from that district.

As a humanitarian worker, Emmanuel is very concerned with the low mental health literacy in Malawian society. He realized that if he is to be a part of improving this, he can help change the current situation starting from his area by engaging youth in Phalombe through Phalombe Youth Arms' jurisdiction. He states 'mental health awareness is important to the country as many youths are victims to mental health problems. They need to be aware of what problems they are in as they will be able to understand and identify them. Mental health literacy will help them handle their issues through teaching or the literacy messages brought to them'.

Emmanuel describes himself as a nice guy, someone who rescues others when he can, good at learning and able to speak out. He can adapt to new environments and always stands for the truth. He has had positive influence from pastors who have given him words of encouragement and hope to always go on with life despite the challenges



Caitriona Kealy, a global health student from Queen Mary University of London (QMUL) conducted a research project with Millennium University that aimed to address the gap in literature regarding mental health knowledge, stigma, and services in the context of Malawi's youth. This was follow-on work from our national youth mental health literacy (MHL) survey data. Caitriona conducted interviews with 7 students at Millennium University to further explore these issues.



Her qualitative data revealed that youth knowledge of mental health is relatively poor. The study's use of narrative interviews allowed for a broader interpretation of findings and raised questions surrounding how mental health disorders are products of westernized biomedical models. Participants spoke about language barrier, where specific mental health terms and conditions simply do not exist in the native languages. This highlights shortfalls of international programs like the '[Movement of Global Mental Health](#)', as their over-reliance on western biomedical approaches may hinder their goals of universal approaches to understanding mental health that account for cultural differences. Participants also expressed frustrations around dissatisfaction of mental health services in Malawi and high need to seek assistance to help those struggling with mental health issues. However, young people are limited by their lack of education on mental health, leading to persisting poor literacy and a chain of stigmatization with a lack of effective services to remedy the issues and break the cycle.

MHL through education has been shown to be an important tool for improving young people's health outcomes in low-resource settings. An integrated approach, previously been implemented in Malawian secondary schools targeting teachers yielded positive results, where improving their knowledge and ability to recognize mental health issues through MHL training, was useful for further MH dissemination to their students. However, our study findings at Millennium University, suggest a gap in the direct empowerment of young voices within efforts to improve their mental wellbeing. Perhaps we need to rely more on cultural philosophies like '[Umunthu](#)', recognizing the importance and power of engaging communities to enable opening up the dialogue surrounding mental health in our society more broadly.

Our next newsletter will address common mental health problems identified by our survey respondents and how they affect people in their daily lives.

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