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The Increasing Vulnerability of African Youths to Mental Health Disorders: Risk Factors, Advocacy and Recommendations

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LETTER TO THE EDITOR

The Increasing Vulnerability of African Youths to Mental Health Disorders: Risk Factors, Advocacy and Recommendations

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Sir,

Mental Health Disorders (MHDs) remain an issue of great public health concern all over the world. Their burden continues to intensify in various aspects of people's lives. The prevalence of MHDs is impacted by a variety of global events, including the COVID-19 pandemic, conflicts, and other human vices.

Depression, anxiety disorders, eating disorders, Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, and a variety of other illnesses fall under the category of mental health problems [1]. Nearly 50% of all MHDs start before the age of 14, and 75% start when an individual reaches age 25 [5]. Clinical psychologists and psychiatrists are qualified mental health professionals who can diagnose these diseases.

Various factors predispose people to MHDs. These factors include the standard of living, domestic abuse, stress, nutrition, genetics, society, economy and national policies [1]. In many nations, one in three people is likely to develop MHDs at some point [2]. A study reported that about 13% of the global world population would experience a diagnosable mental health disorder in their lifetime [3]. Depression tends to be more prevalent among women than men, although the rate of psychological disorders is similar in the two genders [4]. A National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) study found that 14.8% of women and 21.2% of men have MHDs [4]. In a different study, it was reported that girls often suffer from emotional illnesses while boys typically suffer from behavioural disorders [6].

Among teenagers, this increase is related to the rapid development of the thinking and social cognition neural circuitry in the brain, which may increase their desire for social approval and fear of peer rejection, especially in today's society where social media is one of the most important communication platforms [7].

In West and Central Africa, more than 60 million people use social media, with a rising number of teenagers adopting these platforms [8]. Granted that the internet and its associated digital developments open up new possibilities for young people, they also give rise to cyberbullying [8]. Attempts at suicide brought on by failure, premarital pregnancies

and contact with harmful diseases/infections, are also common among young people. Furthermore, there has been a significant rise in drug abuse and alcoholism in young people with indications of sadness, anxiety, psychosis and insomnia [9].

Through the Mental Health Leadership and Advocacy Program (mhLAP) and Mental Health Innovation Network Africa (MHINA), several advances have been made in the area of mental health policies and legislation [10]. However, there remains a not-a-priority attitude toward mental health in many African countries.

To conclude, it is necessary to make a concerted effort to improve mental health care, advocacy and provision of extensive communities in schools and learning facilities across African countries, where young people could go as a safe zone for counselling. Multiple online environments can be created to increase awareness of mental health indicators and potential therapies as the number of people utilizing social media sites increases. These platforms could take the form of seminars, surveys, videos, or expert online counselling. There is, in addition, a need to create a social service helpline for children and youth. In many regions, primary healthcare professionals can be educated to diagnose and treat some common mental health issues and disorders. This will reduce the burden on professional mental health practitioners and ensure that people at the grassroots levels have access to therapy.

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Conflict of interest

There are no conflicts of interest.

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