

# Global Crisis, National Commitment: Overcoming Challenges to Inclusive Mental Health in Bhutan

*Sarala Pradhan and Ugyen Samdrup Lhamo*

One in four people is estimated to have either suffered or will suffer from mental health challenges during their lifetime.<sup>1</sup> Mental health is a crucial component of quality health. The World Health Organisation defines health as “a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity”.<sup>2</sup> Good health that is inclusive of proper mental healthcare is a fundamental right that enables people to live their lives to the fullest.

The international community has also picked up on the importance of mental health, given its global prevalence but lack of advances in the field. Since the historic joint statement of 2016 by 73 states to highlight mental health as a crucial component of the right to health, through the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, many reports and resolutions have been passed to prioritise mental health care.<sup>3</sup> The urgency and importance shown at the international level reflect the suffering from the ground where “depression is ranked third in the global burden of disease and is projected to rank first in 2030”.<sup>4</sup> Therefore, there is a global concern and push for improved access and mental health care.

Determinants of health include economic, social, political, psychological, and physical environment.<sup>5</sup> In line with that, mental health also transcends the restrictive fields of psychology and psychiatry; it includes discourse from various other fields, including neuroscience, genomics, and social sciences. The aim of various fields of study and their intersection is to understand mental health and to alleviate mental suffering through “prevention,

---

<sup>1</sup>Department of Economic And Social Affairs Disability, “Mental Health and Development,” United Nations. Accessed on 20 th January, 2023.

<sup>2</sup>“Constitution,” World Health Organisation. Accessed on 20th January, 2023.

<sup>3</sup>“The Right to Mental Health on a Human Rights Council,” The Right to Mental Health, United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner, Accessed on 20th January, 2023.

<sup>4</sup>Department of Economic And Social Affairs Disability, “Mental Health and Development,” United Nations, Accessed on 20 th January, 2023.

<sup>5</sup>“The Right to Mental Health on a Human Rights Council,” The Right to Mental Health, United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner, Accessed on 20th January, 2023.

care and treatment of mental and substance use disorders”<sup>6</sup> to ultimately improve the quality of life. The diverse approach to mental health speaks to the variety and range of complexities and impact of mental health.

However, in Bhutan, mental health is often synonymous with depression, limiting the conversation to a clinical approach. This narrow focus often prevents people from fully understanding the complexities of mental health, leading to challenges in accessing mental health support and normalising mental health. It further allows space for only stereotypical cases of mental illnesses, such as clinical depression, leaving out the wide range of mental health challenges, such as stress and anxiety.

An example are the posters displayed on World Suicide Prevention Day at Sherubtse College in 2021. Most posters highlighting depression were focused on the victims taking an active approach to seeking counselling, and the people depicted as suffering from mental health challenges were often female - all mental health stereotypes. Therefore, it is critical to deviate from the tendency to share a single narrative on mental health. This can be achieved through equipping individuals to talk on the topic in schools, starting from a young age through emotional sensitisation as discussed in detail in the conclusion.

The challenge in understanding mental health is further dominated by the stigma surrounding it. People often associate mental health with weakness or a lack of willpower, internalising the triggers and causes, leading to a reluctance to seek help. When conversing with a wife who was taking counselling sessions to help with depression, she recalled her husband saying “I did not do anything to make you feel unhappy.” This aptly captures most people’s limited awareness of mental health in Bhutan.

Growing up, we have seen many Bhutanese parents tell their children to not cry when they experience grief, sadness and anger. Somehow, the expectation was to move forward from the emotional distress and continue living life. Another norm/pattern in Bhutan is the lack of policies and acceptability for mental health leave. Growing up, taking leave from school to care for my mental health was rarely a priority because it was not as pressing a concern as physical illness.

In 2012, there was a new policy introduced in Bhutan’s middle schools in which students had to produce medical documentation to take medical leave. Students would argue that most of the medical documentation was

<sup>6</sup> Patel and Prince cited by Collins, “What is global mental health?” *World Psychiatry* 19, no. 3 (2020): 265.

for physical illness. It was rare to hear of people taking leave to cope with stress and anxiety. However, there were exceptions to the health policy, that included grief due to death and clinical cases of mental health. Hence, it reinforced the social norm of not taking mental health as seriously as physical health, and it also supports the supposition that mental illness in Bhutan is synonymous with clinical depression and other forms of clinical mental illness.

In the last decade, Bhutan has taken a leap in raising awareness on mental health. For example, a radio show, *Mind Over Matter*, hosted by Namgay Zam, advocated mental health in Bhutan. The show invited experts in the field of mental health, and encouraged discourse on the topic in 2018 when discussion was still sparse on the topic.

Such initiatives that are available to the public and are shared in popular media platforms such as BBS, help us move towards normalising mental health and taking it seriously. The government also introduced the first ever National Suicide Prevention Action Plan, with focus on providing and strengthening service delivery, prevention strategy, institutional and policy responses.<sup>7</sup>

After it was reviewed, the 2018 Action Plan and Mental Health Programme was upscaled to a five-year project with focus on a multi-disciplinary approach to address the mental health and suicide situation in the country.<sup>8</sup> Several initiatives, such as establishing a dedicated committee to work on national suicide prevention, providing services through a hotline, and building capacity of primary health care and counsellors, are ongoing<sup>9</sup> efforts to prioritise mental health.

The national efforts are also supported by international trends in recognising the importance of mental health. The Paro Declaration is a milestone document for Bhutan. It is an international declaration of will, intention, and commitment to push forward “Universal Access to People-centred Mental Health Care and Services” by members of the WHO South-East

---

<sup>7</sup> Gampo Dorji, et al., “Policy and Governance to Address Depression and Suicide in Bhutan: The National Suicide-Prevention Strategy,” *WHO South-East Asia journal of public health* 6, no. 1 (2017): 39-44.

<sup>8</sup> Chencho Dorji, “Suicide Prevention in Bhutan,” News, International Association for Suicide Prevention, December 1, 2020.

<sup>9</sup> Gampo Dorji, et al., “Policy and Governance to Address Depression and Suicide in Bhutan: The National Suicide-Prevention Strategy,” *WHO South-East Asia journal of public health* 6, no. 1 (2017): 39-44.

Asia Region.<sup>10</sup> Having the Paro Declaration signed in Bhutan, and by Bhutan, points to an accelerated push for improved mental health care.

However, it is essential to recognise that people’s identities in terms of class, education, and urban or rural backgrounds impact their understanding and access to mental health care. For example, a 10-year-old student at a private school in Thimphu said “I thought I had anxiety.” Being a young person with access to technology, exposed to various people sharing their mental health experiences, has contributed to the student’s awareness of some of the mental health issues. A generation ago this would not have happened. Therefore, one can assume that the young populace is more familiar with mental health than previous generations.

But, the discourse is often limited to a niche, upper-middle-class family, fluent in English and having the resources to seek information or help on mental health. Therefore, the need to be more inclusive when raising awareness on mental health, is fundamental to empower people to seek help or for the community to address mental health better.

One way a more inclusive awareness of mental health can be achieved is by incorporating mental health awareness in schools through emotional sensitisation and scientific studies across various grades. For example, education on emotion recognition and some tips on expressing and reacting to different emotions would be helpful in lower grades.

In the higher grades, the science behind mental health and its connection to physical health can be taught, for example, studying different forms of trauma and how it changes the physical body, such as the brain. By teaching children about mental health they can learn to identify and understand their emotions, cope with mental health stressors, and emphasise the importance of mental health. This can reduce the stigma surrounding mental health and encourage people to seek support when they need it.

Additionally, by incorporating mental health into Science classes, teachers can be trained to teach these topics, and schools can provide resources for children struggling with mental health. This can create a supportive environment where children feel comfortable talking about their mental health and seeking help when needed.

<sup>10</sup> “WHO South-East Asia Region commits to universal access to people-centred mental health care and services,” News Release, World Health Organisation, 6th September, 2022.

Although we have made some progress in normalising mental health challenges, there is still a vast gap in understanding, accessing, and the availability of mental health care. However, the biggest challenge is the stigma associated with mental health. Perhaps, with an improved effort to educate people of all backgrounds using various outreach and sensitisation programmes and initiatives, we can find spaces within our community to share and get quality support for mental health challenges.

One way to continue building on mental health programmes and initiatives is by encouraging and leveraging national and international partnerships and resources. Mental health has been recognised globally as one of the most pressing concerns of our times due to its stigmatisation and its prevalence. Because of historic negligence of investment in mental health, there is a new push for increase in effort and resources to address mental health challenges.<sup>11</sup>

Organisations in Bhutan can leverage the new opportunities and use it to exchange ideas and improve services. For example, the International Mental Health Association (IMHA), which is an organisation based in the United States, works to provide services through local and international partnerships to three different racial and regional groups.<sup>12</sup> IMHA's goal is to offer capacity building by supporting local leaders, improving community health, and building creative partnerships.<sup>13</sup> An example of a service provided by IMHA is designing trauma informed workshops for partnering local organisations working on mental health. Such partnerships enable the exchange of knowledge and good practices.

In conclusion, Bhutan's focus on wholesome growth must include inner peace and happiness, which comes from well-attended mental health. Although, through the religious teachings in Dzongkha, a groundwork for mental health that focuses on the Buddhist teachings of detachment and self-awareness is laid. For an issue as complex and multidisciplinary as mental health, a multipronged approach that includes emotional sensitisation through schools, leveraging partnerships, and continuing public discourse through media platforms is needed. By taking a holistic approach to improving mental care, Bhutan can strengthen its commitment to achieving Gross National Happiness and build a happier and healthier society for its population.

---

<sup>11</sup> "WHO report highlights global shortfall in investment in mental health," News Release, World Health Organisation, October 8th, 2021.

<sup>12</sup> The three racial and regional groups are: Black Mental Health Programme, South Asian Mental Health Initiative, and Afghan Empowerment Programme.

<sup>13</sup> "What we are about," International Mental Health Association, Accessed on 05th March, 2023

## References

- Collins, Pamela Y. “What is global mental health?” *World Psychiatry* 19, no. 3 (2020): 265.
- Department of Economic And Social Affairs Disability. “Mental Health and Development.” United Nations. Accessed on 20th January, 2023. <https://www.un.org/development/desa/disabilities/issues/mental-health-and-development.html>
- Dorji, Chenchu. “Suicide Prevention in Bhutan.” *News. International Association for Suicide Prevention*. December 1, 2020. <https://www.iasp.info/2020/12/01/suicide-prevention-in-bhutan/>
- Dorji, Gampo, Sonam Choki, Kinga Jamphel, Yeshe Wangdi, Tandin Chogyel, Chenchu Dorji, and Damber Kumar Nirola. “Policy and governance to address depression and suicide in Bhutan: the national suicide-prevention strategy.” *WHO South-East Asia journal of public health* 6, no. 1 (2017): 39-44.
- Major Themes. “Health and Well-Being.” World Health Organisation. Accessed on 18th January, 2023. <https://www.who.int/data/gho/data/major-themes/health-and-well-being#:~:text=The%20WHO%20constitution%20states%3A%20%22Health,of%20mental%20disorders%20or%20disabilities>
- “Constitution.” World Health Organisation. Accessed on 20th January, 2023. <https://www.who.int/about/governance/constitution#:~:text=Health%20is%20a%20state%20of,belief%2C%20economic%20or%20social%20condition>
- “The Right to Mental Health on a Human Rights Council.” The Right to Mental Health. United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner. Accessed on 20th January, 2023. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/special-procedures/sr-health/right-mental-health#:~:text=In%20March%202016%2C%2073%20States,of%20the%20right%20to%20health>
- “WHO South-East Asia Region commits to universal access to people-centered mental health care and services.” *News Release. World Health Organisation*. 6th Spetmber, 2022. [https://www.who.int/southeastasia/news/detail/06-09-2022-who-south-east-asia-region-commits-to-universal-access-to-people-centered-mental-health-care-and-services?fbclid=IwAR1h8WHUqVC1-M6TzShbmjqsBep9\\_60y23qeHVCMvI\\_rCv0-MtxSwh91NxUI](https://www.who.int/southeastasia/news/detail/06-09-2022-who-south-east-asia-region-commits-to-universal-access-to-people-centered-mental-health-care-and-services?fbclid=IwAR1h8WHUqVC1-M6TzShbmjqsBep9_60y23qeHVCMvI_rCv0-MtxSwh91NxUI)
- “WHO report highlights global shortfall in investment in mental health.” *News Release. World Health Organisation*. 8th October 2021. <https://www.who.int/news/item/08-10-2021-who-report-highlights-global-shortfall-in-investment-in-mental-health>
- “What we are about.” *International Mental Health Association*. Accessed on 05th March, 2023. <https://imha.ngo/our-story>