Mental health in South Sudan: a ticking time bomb

Decades of war and conflict have caused a considerable amount of physical and mental trauma among South Sudanese. Mental health remains a heavily neglected, unacknowledged issue in South Sudan despite affecting all facets of society

Mental health (psychiatric) disorders include conditions such as depression, anxiety, schizophrenia and Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). These disorders have been associated with substance abuse and violence. Despite the commonality of mental health disorders and their impact on South Sudanese society, they are heavily stigmatised and misunderstood. The negative connotations surrounding psychiatric disorders renders psychiatry one of the most neglected fields of medicine, not just in South Sudan, but worldwide.

Mental health patients kept in chains (file photo - South Sudan)

Data on mental health in South Sudan are limited. However, a study in Juba found that 36% of the sampled population met the criteria for PTSD. Despite this, South Sudan only has two practicing psychiatrists in the entire country. Mental health patients are often neglected or imprisoned, instead of receiving the support that they need.

It's high time that mental health is taken seriously and that mental health issues are tackled with the urgency they deserve. According to the World Health Organization, positive mental health is associated with good physical health, which then has a positive effect on long-term relationships, education and employability in a healthy working environment. Though South Sudan is currently facing economic, political and humanitarian crises, mental health needs to be prioritised as a necessity for a functional, productive society. It is the duty of the government to protect and fulfil every citizen's right to physical and mental healthcare. The general wellbeing of citizens is critical for the rebuilding of the country's social fabric and overall development.

> MENTAL HEALTH PATIENTS ARE OFTEN NEGLECTED OR IMPRISONED, INSTEAD OF RECEIVING THE SUPPORT THAT THEY NEED.

The Ministry of Health can invest in mental health by improving mental health services, and training mental health practitioners. There is also a need for public health education to increase mental health awareness through campaigns and community initiatives. This will go a long way in reducing stigma and empowering people to recognise the signs of mental health disorders. Counselling, psychosocial support and training should be made available to the displaced or those living in towns and villages that have recently been under attacks of violence. Training professionals and mental health workers within communities will ensure that these important services are made available to those in very remote areas, which are lacking in access to healthcare in general. The impact of mental health disorders on South Sudanese society has devastating and far-reaching consequences. For the country to have long-lasting peace and a productive society, a healthy population is not an option, but a necessity.

Sieta Adhieu Majok, MSc

University of Birmingham, UK (Alumni)

Email: sietamajok@gmail.com