

International House NY

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Sensitization Campaign for the Silent Crisis of Mental Health and Illness in The Gambia
The Gambia

Background: Mental Health in The Gambia

Despite having a population of approximately 2.1 million people,¹ there is only one psychiatry hospital in The Gambia to treat patients with mental disorders: Tanka Tanka Psychiatric Hospital. It is located in the capital city of Banjul under the direction of the Edward Francis Small Teaching Hospital, the biggest hospital in the country. Although there have been no empirical studies conducted in the country to date, the number of Gambians afflicted by mental health issues was estimated by the World Health Organization to be between 27,300 (severe disorders) and 91,000 (all mental disorders).² The maximum number of people who are being treated is around 3,278.³ An estimated 90% are thus left without treatment.⁴ There is much stigma in the country surrounding mental illness. Many people believe that it is caused by evil spirits who have 'possessed' the person, so they first choose to look for help from traditional healers. Treatment usually includes verses of the Quran written on paper then washed in water. The water is then drunk by the patient. Local herbal remedies are also used.⁵ Families turn to medical services once the mental illness has become too severe. This creates familial and societal conflict as many people suffering from severe mental illness are either homeless or shunned by their family due to stigma. When it comes to less noticeable mental health issues such as depression, burn out, or anxiety they are just as equally neglected. There are three known local NGOs in The Gambia who have dedicated their work to sensitizing the public on mental health. Their reach is however very limited and they often lack funding. This is a common problem among local NGOs. This limits the quantity and, above all, quality of their work.⁶ They must spend more time focusing on *finding* funds instead of on how they can best use their resources to meet their goals. To save on costs, the NGOs often use sensitization material from outside the country. The people in these sensitization videos and posters are majority white and come from a very different background than the target group. This makes the topic of mental health even further removed from the Gambian context.

Goals

The goals of the project are three-fold: 1) Empower local NGOs and give them the tools to run effective and sustainable social media sensitization campaigns, 2) Develop and support a social media campaign to dispel myths and reduce the stigma surrounding mental health and illness, and 3) Encourage the government and other agencies to fund programs and campaigns regarding mental health. Through the project a camera will be purchased which will be used to film the short videos. The camera will belong to all collaboration partners so that they can continue to create videos and material for the future campaigns.

Project Description

The project will bring together at least five⁷ local NGOs to develop and run a social media sensitization campaign focused on mental health and illness. A local media company, Cinatrix Media, has been chosen as an important partner in guiding and assisting with the project. Almost none of the NGOs have

¹ The World Bank. The World Bank in The Gambia. Retrieved from: <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/gambia/overview>

² Jawo, Kaddy (2020): The Painful Reality Behind Mental Health in The Gambia. Retrieved from <https://www.chronicle.gm/the-painful-reality-behind-mental-health-in-the-gambia/>

³ *ibid.*

⁴ World Health Organization: THE GAMBIA Situational Analysis. Retrieved from https://www.who.int/mental_health/policy/country/thegambia/en/

⁵ Kretschmar, Imogen; Nyan, Ousman; Mendy, Ann Marie (2012): Mental health in the Republic of The Gambia. In *International Psychiatry* 9(2), pp. 38-40. Retrieved from https://www.cambridge.org/core/services/aop-cambridge-core/content/view/E135B098BC877D2B5F172D49543B5447/S1749367600003076a.pdf/mental_health_in_the_republic_of_the_gambia.pdf

⁶ Hayssen, Jonathan; Viravaidya, Mechai (2001): Strategies to Strengthen NGO Capacity in Resource Mobilization through Business Activities. Retrieved from https://www.unaids.org/sites/default/files/media_asset/jc579-strategies_ngo_en_2.pdf

⁷ The names of the NGOs are listed on the document verifying their cooperation in this project. Please see the submitted verification of partnership document.

experience in developing and running social media campaigns. Cinatrix Media has worked with local and international organizations, NGOs, institutions, and governments on various topics and has consulted and guided local NGOs on running campaigns.⁸ Radio is still a very important means of information dissemination in the country. In addition to social media, the videos will be adapted for radio so that they can reach a wider audience, in particular, those in the rural areas.

Activities

Firstly, the NGOs will be trained on how to run and evaluate social media campaigns on the topic of mental health. The training will be conducted by myself, leveraging my knowledge of public health, and Cinatrix Media. In addition, Cinatrix Media will teach members of each NGO how to properly use the purchased camera and edit content. After this, as a team, six short videos will be developed for social media (Facebook, YouTube, and Whatsapp) based around the following topics: 1) What is mental health? – breaking stereotypes, 2) Mental illness including schizophrenia and others, 3) Mental health issues of depression, bipolar disorder, and suicide, 4) Mental illness and drug abuse, 5) Mental health and domestic violence, and 6) Local resources for treating mental health and illness.⁹ I will work in collaboration with the local partners to develop the content of the short videos. Using my public health expertise, I will focus on fine-tuning the local messaging to be consistent with health communication best practices. The videos will be filmed in English, which is the official language, but each will be translated into five of the most commonly spoken local languages in order to reach people throughout the country. Each video will then be converted into a radio version. In contrast to the videos, the radio versions will only be in English and two of the most prominent languages in the country. Once completed, the partner NGOs will share the videos throughout their social media platforms and the videos will be given to the Ministry of Health for their use. The NGOs will include these videos in their already established sensitization tours around the country bringing the topic of mental health to a variety of communities. It is important to note that the people in the short videos will look like their audience, speak the same language as them, and share the same background, culture, and beliefs. This will make the topic of mental health ‘Gambian’, and thus more relatable to Gambians and deserving of their attention.

Indicators of Success

The impact and success of the objectives of this project will be measured in various ways. Firstly, the impact of the training centered on public health communication and how to develop and run an effective social media campaign can be assessed through a feedback survey given to the participants at the end of the training. The results can then be compiled and compared to assess effectiveness. Secondly, the successful production and distribution of the short videos and radio spots will be indicators that the NGOs were able to develop, produce, and execute a campaign on mental health. At the time of project status reporting, it will be too early to know if the campaign has had the intended effect of dispelling myths and reducing stigma surrounding mental health in The Gambia or if the government and other agencies have been encouraged to increase funding for such endeavors. We will thus determine success by the ability of the local NGOs to quantify their digital campaign’s reach using built-in analytics features on each platform. The longer-term outcomes can then be assessed by the NGOs internally in the year 2022 after they have had time to conduct their yearly sensitization campaigns and the social media and radio content has had time to spread throughout all platforms and areas of the country.

⁸ Cinatrix Media has worked with UNICEF, the WFP, UNDP, the European Union, and the Gambian Ministry of Health in developing and producing social media content and documentaries pertaining to topics such as women’s empowerment through aid, sensitization on COVID-19, children’s nutrition and feeding programs at schools, and the use of 3D printing technology as a means of development. In addition, it has consulted for many local NGOs on how to run (social media) sensitization campaigns. It also trains young Gambians, with a focus on young women, free of charge, in filmmaking and photography. The company will not earn any money through their collaboration.

⁹ These topics were chosen based around the focus area of the NGOs collaborating on this project and what they voiced as main issues during preliminary talks leading up to this proposal.