



NHRC STATEMENT ON WORLD MENTAL HEALTH DAY 2026

Theme: “Lived Experiences Heard: Real Voices, Real Change”

As we commemorate World Mental Health Day 2026, the National Human Rights Commission of The Gambia joins the international community in reaffirming the fundamental importance of mental health and the need to ensure that every person can enjoy their right to mental health, dignity, equality and participation without discrimination.

This year’s theme, **“Lived Experiences Heard: Real Voices, Real Change,”** is a call to listen to and act upon the voices of people with lived experiences of mental health conditions. It challenges governments, institutions, health-care and service providers, communities and other stakeholders to ensure that people with lived experiences are meaningfully involved in shaping the policies, programmes, services and decisions that affect their lives. It recognizes that their experiences are not merely stories, but important bases of knowledge and expertise that must inform and guide the design, delivery and evaluation of mental health systems.

This call is particularly important to The Gambia as people experiencing mental health conditions continue to face stigma, discrimination, social exclusion and barriers to accessing appropriate and affordable services. For many individuals and families, these challenges can be compounded by limited awareness, misconceptions surrounding mental health, financial constraints and the lack of available and specialised services, particularly for people living in rural and underserved communities.

Recent efforts to enhance the quality and accessibility of mental health services are encouraging developments, particularly the integration of mental health into primary health care. However, strengthening services must go hand in hand with strengthening the rights, dignity and participation of persons with mental health conditions.

The ongoing efforts to reform The Gambia’s legal and policy framework on mental health are therefore significant. The Mental Health Bill 2025 represents an opportunity to move towards a modern, rights-based and community-focused mental health care system. The proposed reforms seek to strengthen the protection of dignity and rights while promoting access to mental health services within communities, schools, prisons and health-care facilities

The NHRC emphasises that mental health is not only a public health concern but also a human rights issue. Reforms premised on human rights-based approach to providing services are therefore key in ensuring the fundamental human right of the highest attainable standard of physical, mental and social well-being. To guarantee such standards, the mental healthcare system must guarantee that persons with mental health conditions enjoy other rights such as the right to dignity, equality and non-discrimination; the right to health; the right to access information, the right to privacy and family life; the right to education and employment; the right to participation; and the right to be treated humanely and with respect.

The 2026 theme is a reminder that there can be no meaningful mental health reform without the meaningful participation of people with lived experiences.

In The Gambia, we must create safe and meaningful spaces where persons with lived experiences, their families and caregivers can speak about the realities they face and, importantly, where their recommendations inform and guide the care system. The State's obligations under regional and international instruments such as the ICCPR, CRC, ACRWR, etc to guarantee the right to access information and the right to participation are primarily important in advancing this year's theme on advancing mental health rights. The meaningful participation requires us to address the social and economic barriers that exacerbate mental health challenges and create inclusive communities and other avenues that will enhance the full and meaningful participation of people living mental health conditions in the matters that affect them, and to reach their full potentials.

Particular attention must be given to children and young people. Mental health support should be integrated into child protection, education and other services that affect children and adolescents. Schools must be safe environments where children can seek help without fear of stigma or punishment. Teachers, caregivers and frontline workers should be equipped to identify mental health concerns early and appropriately refer children and young people for support.

The NHRC recognises that mental health is influenced by broader social and economic conditions. Poverty, unemployment, violence, discrimination, social isolation and other forms of inequality can affect mental well-being. Addressing mental health therefore requires a whole-of-government and whole-of-society approach involving the health, education, justice, social protection, labour and other relevant sectors, as well as civil society, communities, families and people with lived experience.

On this World Mental Health Day, the NHRC calls on all stakeholders to strengthen consultation and meaningful participation of people living with mental health conditions; move from stigma to understanding; from exclusion to inclusion; and from institutional and custodial approaches to rights-based, person-centred and community-based care. The NHRC recommends that:

- The Government continues to strengthen the legal and policy framework for mental health, especially prioritizing the passing of the Mental Health Bill 2025 into law and to ensure that persons with lived experiences are meaningfully represented in the development, implementation and monitoring of mental health policies and programmes.
- Mental health services are made accessible, affordable, confidential, respectful and responsive to the needs and preferences of service users.
- Communities, families and traditional and religious leaders help challenge stigma, promote understanding and create supportive environments where people can seek help without fear of shame, rejection or discrimination.
- Civil society organisations and organisations led by persons with lived experience to continue advocating for inclusive, rights-based mental health services and to ensure that the voices of those directly affected remain central to national conversations on mental health.

World Mental Health Day 2026 provides us with an opportunity not only to speak about mental health but to listen differently with respect, openness, and most importantly, to act on what we hear.

For The Gambia, let this year's theme be a call to build a mental health system with people, not merely for people; with lived experience at the centre, not at the margins.