



## Nigeria's new mental health bill: An opportunity to fight stigma?

### ARTICLE INFO

#### Keywords

Mental health  
Mental disorders  
Social stigma  
Health policy

#### Dear Editor

Mental illness remains a significant public health concern worldwide. According to the World Health Organization, at some point, one in four people will be affected by mental or neurological disorders globally.<sup>1</sup> In Nigeria, mental health may have affected up to 20% of the country's population.<sup>1</sup> Despite the scale of the problem, there remains a significant stigma surrounding mental health issues, which prevents affected individuals from seeking mental health professional assistance. Stigma is a critical factor that limits access to quality mental health care.

On November 28, 2022, the Mental Health Bill that repealed the 65-year-old Lunacy Act was passed by the Nigeria National Assembly (NASS) and transmitted to the president for assent. The Lunacy Act of 1958 was criticized by mental health advocates for its lack of provisions for the rights of individuals with mental illness and for its reliance on institutionalization as the primary form of treatment.<sup>2</sup> After many years of delays and failed attempts at reform, the new Mental Health Bill was finally assented to and signed into law by President Muhammadu Buhari on 6 January 2, 023.<sup>3</sup> With the new bill, the country seeks to fill in the gaps by developing a national mental health policy, establishing a mental health commission, and provisions for the rights of persons with mental illness.<sup>4</sup> Though Nigeria's new mental health bill is a positive step forward, it is important to note that it is just one part of a considerable effort to improve mental health care in the country.

To truly reduce the stigma surrounding mental illness, it will be necessary to prioritize a massive awareness campaign and education to dismantle sociocultural barriers that may cause resistance to mental healthcare-seeking behaviors among the targeted groups. Community-based mental health programs can provide important support to individuals with mental health conditions in Nigeria, especially in rural and remote areas where access to mental health services is limited.

The passage of the mental health bill in Nigeria is a promising development. However, several challenges may hinder its successful implementation. One major concern is the bill's inadequate funding, as the national health budget is relatively small. This is particularly troubling considering the current state of mental health care in Nigeria, which is characterized by a lack of trained personnel, standardization, and regulation, making it difficult for individuals to receive professional and effective treatment. To overcome these challenges, the government

should collaborate with non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and civil society organizations (CSOs) to ensure the swift implementation of the mental health bill. These groups can help raise awareness about the bill, provide input on implementation, and advocate for the necessary resources and support. Additionally, the government could partner with private sector organizations such as private hospitals, telehealth providers, and other private service providers to reach more people and improve access to mental health services. To ensure the success of the bill, it is important that the government establishes a robust monitoring and evaluation system to track progress and make adjustments as needed.

#### Authors' contribution

All authors contributed equally to drafting the manuscript. They all read and approved the final manuscript.

#### Funding

This research did not receive any specific grant from funding agencies in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

#### Ethical approval

Not required.

#### Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationship that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cegh.2023.101248>

Received 10 January 2023; Accepted 3 February 2023

Available online 6 February 2023

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