

Community Based Organizations in Promoting Mental Health amongst Youths in Zimbabwe: A Case of for Youths by Youths in Zimbabwe

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ABSTRACT

This article examined the role of Community-Based Organizations (CBOs) in promoting mental health among youths in Zimbabwe, with a specific focus on *For Youths By Youths* in Mufakose, Harare. A qualitative methodology was employed to gather rich, in-depth data. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with key stakeholders, including members of the CBO, local youth participants, and mental health professionals. Additionally, focus group discussions captured the perspectives of the wider community. Findings indicated that *For Youths By Youths* plays a significant role in promoting mental health among youths in Mufakose. Through various programs and activities, the CBO creates a supportive and inclusive environment that fosters positive mental well-being. It offers a platform for young people to express themselves, build resilience, and develop coping mechanisms. Moreover, the CBO facilitates access to mental health services by collaborating with local healthcare providers and organizing awareness campaigns. Peer support within the CBO was highlighted as crucial, as young people reported feeling understood and validated by their peers. However, challenges such as limited resources, stigma surrounding mental health, and the need for sustained funding and community engagement were identified.

Key words: Mental health, Community-Based Organizations, Youth, substance abuse, community, awareness

BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

Mental health issues among youth have become a significant global concern, affecting individuals across countries and regions (Firth et al., 2019). Zimbabwe, like many other nations, grapples with challenges in promoting mental well-being among its young population. Factors such as poverty, unemployment, limited access to mental healthcare services, and social stigma contribute to the prevalence of mental health problems among Zimbabwean youths. Keyes (2019) reported widespread mental health disorders among adolescents, with depression being the most common condition. Rehm (2019) further highlighted challenges faced by young people in low-income communities where access to resources and support is limited.

Community-Based Organizations (CBOs) have emerged as key players in addressing mental health issues among youths, offering support and interventions tailored to their specific needs. These organizations recognize the importance of a holistic approach that combines mental wellbeing promotion, prevention, and treatment to foster positive mental well-being. One such organization is “For Youths By Youths” in Mufakose, Zimbabwe. In light of the global, regional, and national context, this article focused on examining the impact of community-based organizations, specifically “For Youths By Youths” in Mufakose, Zimbabwe, in promoting mental health among youths. By investigating the activities, strategies, and outcomes of this CBO, the article intends to contribute to the knowledge base on effective community-based approaches for addressing mental health challenges faced by young people in Zimbabwe.

Beyond Zimbabwe, other African Community- Based Organisations have adopted several task-shifted, community-rooted approaches to closing the mental health treatment gap. In East and Southern Africa, StrongMinds operates in Uganda and Zambia using lay-facilitator-led Group Interpersonal Therapy to treat depression among women and adolescents (Baird et al, 2025). In West Africa, BasicNeeds- Ghana has pursued

a broader mental health and development model since 2002, combining treatment access with community-based self-help groups, livelihood support, and rights-based advocacy.

Community-Based Organizations (CBOs) have emerged as key players in addressing mental health issues among youths, offering support and interventions tailored to their specific needs. These organizations recognize the importance of a holistic approach that combines promotion, prevention, and treatment to foster positive mental well-being. In Zimbabwe, one such organization is For Youths By Youths in Mufakose. This article examines its activities, strategies, and outcomes, contributing to the knowledge base on effective community-based approaches for addressing mental health challenges faced by young people in Zimbabwe

Statement of the problem

Mental health issues among youths in Zimbabwe pose a significant problem requiring urgent attention. Despite evidence of widespread conditions such as depression and anxiety, particularly in low-income communities, there is limited understanding of the effectiveness of CBOs in addressing these challenges. In Mufakose, mental health care faces disparities and resource gaps. While progress is being made, more support and investment are needed to enhance the availability of professionals, expand community-based programs, and integrate mental health into primary healthcare services. By examining For Youths By Youths, this article provides valuable insights into the impact of CBOs in promoting mental health among Zimbabwean youth.

Theoretical Framework

Human Security theory

This article was guided by the Human Security theory which is built upon several key assumptions. UNDP (2020) notes that Human Security assumes that the security of individuals is paramount and should be prioritized over state security. This shift from a state-centric approach challenges the traditional realist perspective that focuses primarily on the security of the nation-state. Secondly Leeb et al (2020) states that the theory assumes that security is multidimensional, encompassing not only physical safety but also economic, social, and political well-being. According to Shaw and MacLean (2019) Human Security recognizes that individuals face various threats, such as deprivation, poor health, ecological harm and fundamental human rights violations which must be addressed comprehensively.

One of the strengths of Human Security theory lies in its broad and inclusive perspective. By expanding the concept of security beyond military concerns, it captures a wide range of threats and vulnerabilities that individuals face in their daily lives (Liang, 2020). This holistic approach allows for a more comprehensive understanding of security challenges and enables the development of targeted policies and interventions. Moreover, Shaw and MacLean (2019) notes that Human Security theory emphasizes the interconnectedness of security issues, recognizing that problems in one area, such as poverty or environmental degradation, can have far-reaching consequences for individuals and communities. This interconnectedness calls for a collaborative and integrated approach to security, involving multiple actors and sectors.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Defining Mental Health

The concept of mental health encompasses a multifaceted understanding of psychological well-being. Scholars have offered various definitions and frameworks to capture the intricacies of mental wellbeing and provide a comprehensive understanding of this concept. One widely referenced definition is provided by the World Health Organization (WHO). According to the WHO, mental health is defined as "a state of well-being in which an individual realizes their own abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively, and is able to contribute to their community" (WHO, 2022). This meaning emphasizes the positive aspects of mental health, focusing on an individual's capacity to function effectively and maintain a sense of sustain emotionally resilience in challenging times. According to Zimbabwe Mental Health Act (1996), mental health is often defined as "a state of well-being in which the individual realizes his or her own

abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to his or her community." This definition emphasizes the importance of both mental health and social functioning and also emphasizes the importance of emotional wellbeing in promoting productivity and social contribution. Other scholars have emphasized the importance of subjective experiences and emotions in defining mental health. Del and Wang (2023) introduced the concept of "complete mental health," which encompasses both the absence of mental illness and the presence of positive psychological well-being. Keyes (2007) argues that mental health should not be solely defined by the absence of symptoms or disorders but should also include factors such as a sense of direction and significance in life. Furthermore, the Mental Health Foundation (2019) emphasizes the dynamic nature of mental health, stating that it is "the emotional and spiritual resilience which enables us to enjoy life and to survive pain, disappointment and sadness." This definition points out the importance of adaptability and resilience in maintaining mental health, acknowledging that individuals will inevitably face challenging circumstances.

Moreover there is also a consensus in the definitions given by scholars. Research by Smith et al. (2021) supports the WHO definition by demonstrating the positive impact of mental well-being on overall functioning and productivity. Similarly, studies by Fredrickson (2001) and Diener et al. (2019) provide empirical evidence for the relevance of positive emotions and life satisfaction in mental health. These studies highlight the significance of subjective experiences in promoting understanding mental health beyond the absence of mental illness. There is therefore an association between factors such as purpose and meaning in life and mental health outcomes (Keyes, 2019). This emphasizes the significance of cultivating a positive outlook for well-being in mental health definitions and interventions.

Prevalence of Mental Health Disorders Among Youths

Several scholarly studies provide valuable insights into the prevalence and impact of mental health disorders among youths. Mental health issues among youths have been a growing concern worldwide. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), (2020) approximately 10-20% of children and adolescents worldwide experience mental health disorders. Anxiety disorders affect around 10-20% of children and adolescents. These disorders encompass conditions like generalized anxiety disorder (GAD), social anxiety disorder, and specific phobias. Depression is a prevalent mental health disorder among youths, with an estimated 3-5% of children and adolescents affected.

According to a study by Musoni (2022), it is estimated that approximately one in five youths worldwide experiences a mental health disorder. This underscores the significant prevalence of mental health challenges among young individuals and highlights the essentiality of attention and intervention in this area. These disorders often emerge during adolescence and can have long-term consequences if left untreated, potentially affecting the overall well-being of affected individuals. Supporting this, a meta-analysis conducted by Wu et al. (2021) further emphasizes the global burden of mental health disorders in young individuals. The study reveals that mental health disorders, such as anxiety, depression, and substance use disorders, significantly contribute to disability-adjusted life years (DALYs) among youths. This indicates not only the personal impact on affected individuals but also the broader societal implications of untreated mental health challenges in the youth population (Wu et al., 2020).

In addition to global studies, research has also examined the prevalence of mental health disorders among specific communities and the associated risk factors. For instance, a study by Patel et al. (2018) focused on low- and middle-income countries, revealing a higher prevalence of mental health disorders among disadvantaged youths, particularly those living in urban slums. The study highlights the detrimental impact of poverty, unemployment, and exposure to violence as risk factors contributing to mental health challenges in these communities.

These cited studies provide compelling evidence for the urgent need to address mental health issues among youths and implement effective intervention strategies (Wiens et al., 2020; Wu, 2020; Patel et al., 2018). By understanding the global burden and risk factors associated with mental health disorders, policymakers, healthcare professionals, and scholars can work together to develop targeted interventions and support systems that promote the well-being of young individuals worldwide (Wu, 2020; Patel et al., 2018). Moreover, the

impact of societal expectations and academic pressures on the mental health of youths has been extensively studied.

A study by Chenai et al. (2023) conducted in European countries emphasizes the association between academic stress and mental health problems among students. The study reveals that high levels of academic stress contribute to increased rates of anxiety, depression, and burnout among students, highlighting the importance of comprehensive support systems in educational settings to address the psychological well-being of students (Buli et al., 2023). While the above examples provide a global perspective on the prevalence of mental health disorders among youths, it is important to recognize that similar challenges exist in various communities, including those in Zimbabwe. Although specific scholarly studies focusing on Mufakose may be limited, the global evidence underscores the significance of addressing mental health challenges faced by youths in the community. By understanding the prevalence of mental health disorders and the underlying factors contributing to these challenges, Community-based Organizations can then tailor their interventions to meet the specific needs of the local youth population.

METHODOLOGY

This article was guided by interpretivism, which emphasizes understanding social reality from the perspectives of individuals involved, considering their lived experiences, beliefs, values, and social interactions (Bryman, 2016). A qualitative case study design was employed to comprehensively examine the influence of CBOs on youth mental health. A sample of 25 participants was selected, including current and past beneficiaries of the organization's programs, volunteers, staff members, and community leaders. Semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions were conducted to collect data. The chosen sample size was based on the principles of qualitative research, which prioritizes depth and richness of data over statistical representativeness. In qualitative studies, the focus is not on generalizing findings to a larger population but rather on gaining in-depth insights and understanding of the research phenomenon (Creswell, 2013). By engaging a smaller number of participants, the researchers devoted more time and attention to each individual, ensuring a comprehensive exploration of their experiences, perspectives, and narratives. This article employed a purposive sampling technique, as it enabled the selection of participants with direct experience of the CBO's mental health interventions, ensuring information-rich cases relevant to the research objectives. Unstructured interviews were conducted with the selected participants who have engaged with the community-based organization. Documentary analysis was done to gather additional insights into the activities, programs, and approaches of the community-based organization.

RESULTS

Causes of Mental Health Issues Among Youths

The most indicated causes of mental health issues among youths were academic pressure, influence of social media, lack of social support and meaningful connections. The most commonly cited cause was academic pressure, with 80% identifying it as a significant contributor to mental health issues among young individuals. This finding highlights the immense burden placed on youths to excel academically and the resulting impact on their mental well-being. The influence of social media was also recognized as a significant factor, with 10 participants 66.7% acknowledging its role in contributing to mental health challenges. The relentless exposure to carefully curated images and the pressure to conform to unrealistic standards on social media platforms were identified as detrimental to the mental well-being of young people. Additionally, the lack of social support and meaningful connections emerged as a notable cause, with 8 participants 53.3% identifying it as a contributing factor. This finding underscores the importance of fostering supportive environments and establishing strong social networks to promote positive mental health outcomes among youths.

Influence of Social Media

The article assessed how social media usage affects the mental well-being of young individuals. One of the respondents had this to say:

Most of my time I will be on social media scrolling and comparing myself to others. It makes me feel inadequate and anxious about my own life. The pressure that we get from Instagram you wouldn't understand.

The authors learnt that the findings highlight the negative impacts of social media on mental health among youths. The findings align with existing literature that suggests that social media can lead to feelings of inadequacy, anxiety, and pressure to meet unrealistic standards (Faelens et al., 2021). The constant exposure to curated images and comparisons on social media platforms can contribute to a negative self-perception and increased levels of stress. Moreover, the prevalence of cyberbullying on social media platforms can further exacerbate mental health issues among youths (Kowalski et al., 2014). Most youths have now resorted to content creation for monetization where they now face cyber bullying. These findings underscore the need for awareness and strategies to promote healthy social media usage among young individuals, including digital well-being education, promoting positive online interactions, and fostering a supportive online environment.

Lack of Social Support and Meaningful Networks

The authors got to understand how the absence of supportive relationships and networks contributes to mental health challenges in young individuals. One respondent indicated that

I feel isolated and lonely most of the time. I don't have anyone I can confide in or seek support from when I'm going through tough times.

Another youth said:

I long for a sense of belonging and connection. Without a strong support system, I struggle to cope with stress and feelings of anxiety.

The findings indicate the detrimental effects of lack of social support and meaningful networks on the mental well-being of young individuals. The findings align with previous research that emphasizes the importance of social support in promoting mental health and well-being (Thoits, 2011). The absence of close relationships and a lack of social connections can lead to feelings of loneliness, isolation, and an increased vulnerability to mental health issues. Building and maintaining supportive networks are crucial for providing emotional support, coping with stress, and fostering a sense of belonging and connectedness. Promoting initiatives that encourage the development of meaningful relationships, such as community engagement programs, peer support groups, and mentoring opportunities, can play a vital role in addressing mental health challenges among youths.

Academic Pressure

Respondents indicated how the demanding academic environment affects the mental well-being of young individuals. One respondent said:

Grades define my worth in this competitive environment. I constantly feel stressed and anxious about not meeting the academic standards set by society.

Such perspectives shed light on the negative consequences of academic pressure on the mental well-being of young individuals. The findings align with existing research that highlights the detrimental effects of academic stress on mental health (Levecque et al., 2017). The intense pressure to excel academically can lead to high levels of stress, anxiety, and feelings of inadequacy. The emphasis on grades and performance as indicators of success can create a toxic environment that undermines overall well-being. Implementing strategies to promote a balanced approach to education, such as fostering a supportive learning environment, encouraging stress management techniques, and providing resources for mental health support, can help mitigate the negative impact of academic pressure on youths' mental health.

Relationships

Many young people face pressures to conform to social expectations, navigate breakups, or manage conflicts with friends and family, which can lead to feelings of rejection, loneliness, and low self-worth. The rise of

social media intensifies these struggles, as constant comparisons and public exposure of private matters often magnify insecurities. When relationships become unstable or toxic, youths may experience heightened stress, anxiety, or depression, as their sense of belonging and identity is deeply tied to these connections. Without healthy coping mechanisms or supportive networks, unresolved relationship issues can spiral into broader mental health concerns, affecting academic performance, self-esteem, and overall well-being.

Mental Health Challenges

The article identified the most common mental health challenges reported by the youths which were anxiety and stress, depression and substance abuse.

Anxiety and Stress

The findings obtained indicate the prevalence of anxiety and stress among youths in Mufakose, Zimbabwe. Anxiety and stress are common mental health challenges faced by young individuals, and understanding their prevalence and underlying factors is crucial for developing targeted interventions.

A youth interviewed said:

I feel constantly on edge and worried about everything. The pressure to excel academically and secure a better future is overwhelming. It's like there's never a moment of relief.

There's a constant fear of failure and not meeting societal expectations. We feel the need to prove ourselves at every step, and it takes a toll on our mental well-being. Worse with this "majava"(lobola) thing society has its expectations.

The findings reveal a significant prevalence of anxiety and stress among youths in Mufakose. It highlights the experience of youths who are feeling constantly on edge and overwhelmed by academic pressure and societal expectations to mention marriage issues. The pressure to excel academically is a common source of stress among young individuals, particularly in societies where educational achievements are highly valued (Hjorthøj et al., 2016). Such findings align with studies that highlight the impact of adverse life events and social disadvantage on the development of anxiety and stress among youths (Rees et al., 2019).

Substance Abuse

Substance abuse is a significant concern that often co-occurs with mental health disorders, exacerbating the challenges faced by young individuals. Understanding the prevalence of substance abuse and its implications for mental well-being is essential for designing effective interventions. When asked about the relationship between substance abuse and mental health one of the respondents said:

Substance abuse is prevalent in our community. We see young people resorting to drugs to cope with stress, trauma, and the difficulties of daily life. It numbs the pain temporarily, but it only makes things worse in the long run.

From the findings the authors noted that many young individuals turn to drugs and substances as a means to escape from their problems. However, they acknowledge that substance abuse only provides temporary relief and ultimately worsens their overall well-being. This aligns with the literature, which indicates that substance abuse is often used as a maladaptive coping mechanism to deal with psychological distress (Brière et al., 2014; Sinha, 2008). From the responses it was noted that there is widespread evidence of substance abuse within the community, suggesting that it is a common and accepted coping strategy among young individuals in Mufakose. The mention of using drugs to cope with stress, trauma, and daily life challenges reflects the self-medication hypothesis, which posits that individuals may turn to substances to alleviate emotional pain or distress (Khantzian, 1997).

Strategies Implemented by Community Based Organisations (For Youths By Youths)

The article identified several strategies implemented by For Youths By Youths to promote mental health among youths in Mufakose. These strategies include awareness campaigns, peer support groups, counselling services, skills development programs, and community engagement initiatives. The organization's efforts were aimed at addressing the identified mental health challenges and providing a supportive environment for the youth population.

Community-Based Mental Health Programs

The organization implements community based mental health programs. One key informant said:

Our community-based mental health program has been instrumental in reaching out to young individuals who may not otherwise have access to professional help. We provide counselling services and organize awareness campaigns to promote mental well-being.

The findings shed light on the significance of community-based mental health programs in Mufakose and highlight their positive impact on mental well-being. By providing counselling services and organizing awareness campaigns, these programs bridge the gap between mental health services and the community. The implementation of community-based mental health programs in Mufakose demonstrates the effectiveness of these interventions in addressing mental health challenges among young individuals. By providing accessible and culturally relevant support, these programs not only bridge the gap between mental health services and the community but also contribute to reducing stigma and promoting help-seeking behaviors. The incorporation of traditional healing practices and community involvement further enhances the impact of these programs.

Peer Support Networks

Another strategy by CBOs to reduce the impact of mental health challenges is the use of peer support networks. One participant had this to say:

Our peer support network has been instrumental in providing a sense of belonging and understanding for young individuals struggling with mental health issues. It allows them to connect with peers who have faced similar challenges, fostering empathy and support.

The findings indicated the significance of peer support networks in addressing mental health challenges among young individuals in Mufakose. They highlight the importance of these networks in fostering a sense of belonging and understanding. Connecting individuals with peers who have faced similar challenges provides a unique opportunity for empathy and support. This aligns with existing literature that emphasizes the role of peer support in creating a supportive environment where individuals can share experiences, reduce isolation, and develop a sense of belonging (Davidson et al., 2021; Pfeiffer et al., 2019).

Awareness

Results obtained outlined awareness as another strategy implemented by CBOs' in trying to reduce mental health issues. One key informant said:

Through our awareness campaigns, we have seen a positive shift in attitudes towards mental health. People are more willing to talk openly about their struggles and seek help, knowing that support is available.

This highlighted the significance of awareness-raising initiatives in addressing mental health challenges among young individuals in Mufakose. By organizing community events, distributing informational materials, and conducting interactive workshops, awareness campaigns engage individuals of all ages. The implementation of awareness-raising initiatives in Mufakose demonstrates the effectiveness of these interventions in combating mental health challenges among young individuals. By increasing knowledge, challenging stigma, and promoting help-seeking behaviors, awareness campaigns contribute to improved mental health outcomes. The

findings from the interviews align with existing literature on the positive impact of awareness-raising initiatives in increasing mental health literacy and reducing stigma (Jorm et al., 2005; Clement et al., 2015).

Counselling

Counselling is also one of the strategies that has been implemented by CBOs to help reduce mental health issues. One of the participants said:

Counselling has played a crucial role in helping young individuals navigate their mental health challenges. It provides a safe and confidential space for them to express their emotions, gain self-awareness, and develop coping mechanisms.

This justifies the importance of counselling services in addressing mental health challenges among young individuals in Mufakose. The findings emphasize the role of counselling in creating a secure and confidential atmosphere for individuals to express their feelings. Through counselling, individuals gain self-awareness and develop coping mechanisms, aligning with existing literature that emphasizes the therapeutic benefits of counseling in facilitating emotional expression and coping skills development (Richards et al., 2016; Norcross & Lambert, 2019).

Challenges Being Faced in Implementing Mental Health Programs

During the interviews, CBOs representatives shared their experiences and highlighted the challenges they encounter in implementing mental health programs. The following subheadings provide a breakdown of the challenges identified:

Limited Funding and Resources

The authors noted that limited funding and resources emerged as a significant barrier, hindering the organizations' capacity to deliver comprehensive and sustainable services. This aligns with previous research that has highlighted financial constraints as a common challenge faced by CBOs in the mental health field (Saxena et al., 2020). Insufficient funding restricts the scope of mental health programs, limiting their reach and effectiveness. Additionally, lack of resources, such as trained staff and appropriate facilities, further hampers the organizations' ability to provide adequate support to those in need.

Stigma Surrounding Mental Health

The persistence of stigma surrounding mental health was identified as well as a major hurdle in the implementation of several programs. Despite ongoing efforts to reduce stigma, societal understanding and acceptance of mental health issues remain inadequate. This stigma acts as a deterrent, impeding the engagement and access to support for young individuals who may be experiencing mental health challenges. This finding aligns with existing literature on the impact of stigma on help-seeking behaviors and mental health outcomes (Clement et al., 2015). Addressing stigma through targeted educational campaigns and community-based initiatives is crucial to fostering a supportive environment for mental health programs to thrive.

CONCLUSION

Based on the results of this article it can be concluded that youths in Mufakose face significant mental health challenges, including lack of social support, academic pressures, and limited access to mental health services. The article concluded that For Youths By Youths employs a range of effective strategies to promote mental health among youths in Mufakose. The organization's mentorship programs, community engagement activities, and mental health awareness campaigns have proven to be successful in creating a supportive environment, providing guidance and increasing awareness about mental health issues. These findings are consistent with the research conducted by Smith and Jones (2019), who highlighted the importance of community-based interventions in enhancing mental well-being among young individuals.

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