



Sierra Leone - Researched and compiled by the Refugee Documentation Centre of Ireland on Friday 20 December 2019

Information on psychiatric facilities

A report issued in November 2019 by the *New Humanitarian* states that:

“The World Health Organisation estimates that 10 percent of the seven million Sierra Leoneans have mental health problems. But due to the unknown number of unreported cases, the scourge of depression, anxiety, or post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is likely to be much bigger. For decades, there was only one psychiatrist practising in the country (now there are two) and treatment in the only psychiatric hospital until recently involved restraining patients using chains due to the unavailability of psychotropic drugs. As a consequence, almost 99 percent of those affected go untreated. Instead, spiritual beliefs drive those in need into the shrines of the country’s 45,000 traditional healers” (New Humanitarian (13 November 2019) *Breaking the chains – Sierra Leone’s uphill struggle to reform mental health*, p.1).

A report published in October 2019 by *Medecins Sans Frontieres* points out that:

“Mental illness is a health crisis in Sierra Leone” (Medecins Sans Frontieres (8 October 2019) *Mental health: Removing Mary’s chains*, p.2).

In August 2019 the *Borgen Project* states that:

“There are only “two psychiatrists, two Clinical Psychologists and 19 Mental Health Nurses” in a country of seven million people” (Borgen Project (19 August 2019) *Addressing Mental Health in Sierra Leone*).

In August 2019 *AfricanLII* includes the following commentary from a recent legal case, noting:

“Initially FC came to the UK in 2002 when he was 26. He has been fighting his deportation back to Sierra Leone virtually from the time he arrived. One court after another has turned down his plea not to be returned, including his more recent efforts to claim asylum. Then, in November 2018 a court found that FC would have difficulty in obtaining suitable mental health treatment on his return, and was likely to suffer mistreatment” (AfricanLII (15 August 2019) *Mentally ill man can’t be returned to Sierra Leone – UK courts*, p.1).

In July 2019 the *Royal College of Psychiatrists* states that:

“Sierra Leone has an estimated treatment gap of 98% for severe mental illness...Historically, mental healthcare was delivered at ‘Kissy Lunatic Asylum’ which opened in 1820 and was the oldest asylum in sub-Saharan Africa...Now referred to as the Sierra Leone Psychiatric Hospital (SLPH), it remains the country’s only in-patient facility, treating up to 150 patients at a time. SLPH is highly stigmatised and suffers from chronic underfunding, limited human resources, a lack of basic facilities and frequent interruptions to medication supplies. This often results in restricted treatment options and the chaining of patients; however, this dire situation is now

starting to improve with support from international partners. Sierra Leone continues to use the outdated Lunacy Act of 1902 which is highly Discriminatory” (Royal College of Psychiatrists (22 July 2019) *Mental health in Sierra Leone*, p.1).

This report also states that:

“Two Sierra Leonean psychiatrists returned to the country following completion of specialist training in 2016: one is the medical director at SLPH and the other is the commanding officer of military medical services. Additionally, there is a semi-retired psychiatrist who previously ran SLPH. There are no clinical psychologists or psychiatric social workers in public service” (ibid, p.2).

A publication issued in 2019 by the *World Health Organisation* notes that:

“Sierra Leone, with a population of over 7 000 000, has an estimated burden of 75 000 people with severe mental health disorders and 350 000 with depression. However, the Sierra Leone primary care system faces serious challenges in responding to this high burden of mental health disorders. These challenges range from lack of basic infrastructure to provide care, to severe shortages of mental health clinicians and essential medicines” (World Health Organisation (2019) *Sierra Leone, Annual Report, A Year in Focus 2018*, p.32).

A report issued in March 2019 by the *United States Department of State* reviewing events of 2018 notes:

“The Persons With Disabilities Act prohibits discrimination against persons with physical, sensory, intellectual, and mental disabilities in employment and provision of state services, including judicial services” (United States Department of State (13 March 2019) *Sierra Leone 2018 Human Rights Report*, p.20).

This document also states that:

“There was considerable discrimination against persons with mental disabilities. The vast majority of persons with mental disabilities received no treatment or public services. The Sierra Leone Psychiatric Hospital in Kissy, the only inpatient psychiatric institution that served persons with mental disabilities, was underfunded. Authorities reported that only one consulting psychiatrist was available, patients were not provided sufficient food, and restraints were primitive and dehumanizing. The hospital lacked running water and had only sporadic electricity. Only basic medications were available” (ibid, p.20).

A publication issued in September 2018 by the *Lancet* states that:

“In Sierra Leone, for example, the treatment gap (that is, the proportion of those in need who go untreated) for formal mental health services has been estimated at 98.8%...” (Lancet (September 2018) *Mental health in Africa*

In June 2018 the *United States Agency for International Development* points out that:

“...there are very few mental health providers and little information about psychological pain” (United States Agency for International Development (25 June 2018) *Communities on the Road to Recovery and Healing In Post-Ebola Sierra Leone*).

No further information on this issue could be found among sources available to the RDC.

References

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This response was prepared after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the Refugee Documentation Centre within time constraints. This response is not and does not purport to be conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim to refugee status or asylum. Please read in full all documents referred to.

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Human Rights Watch
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