

Mental Health is a Universal Human Right: PILL Commemorates World Mental Health Day

On Oct 11th, Pakistan Institute of Living and Learning's (PILL) Global Ethics Learning Hub (GELH) at PILL and its partner organisations, in collaboration with Shifa Tameer-e-Millat University (STMU), organised a special hybrid event to mark World Mental Health Day 2023. We brought together thought leaders, professionals, human rights organisations, and mental health advocates for an expert panel discussion to create a meaningful dialogue around this year's theme of 'Mental Health is a basic human right'. Vice Chancellor STMU, Prof Mohammad Iqbal was the Chief Guest.

In her welcome address, Research Fellow University College London, UK, and GELH Chair, Dr Rakhshi Memon expressed her gratitude to all guests for supporting the event. "This momentous occasion serves as a reminder to advocate for better services and support and ultimately a world where mental health is universally recognised as a fundamental right for all. Mental health knows no boundaries but continues to be stigmatised, marginalised, and neglected. It is our duty to challenge these stereotypes and ensure mental health is given the priority it deserves." She also discussed 'talking about mental health' campaigns in the UK which are running successfully and hoped the same could be initiated in Pakistan to eradicate barriers to mental health care.

Our Chief Guest and Vice Chancellor, Prof Mohammad Iqbal, shed light on the importance of education and awareness in improving access to mental health care for all. He remarked that training our workforce adequately is key to disseminating the right information to the general population and enhancing primary healthcare services in the country. His visionary stance highlighted a path towards a future where mental health care is not a privilege but an inherent right for all citizens.

Professor of Psychiatry and Behavioural Sciences, Prof Mowadat H Rana, introduced this year's theme. "Mental health is distinguished from the characteristics of mental illness. Health, in its essence, is not possible without mental health. Mental health is the essence of living for all. We cannot progress and evolve beyond our current circumstances without mental health." He emphasised that we all share the responsibility of promoting and safeguarding mental health, making it something that resonates with people from all walks of life.

In Session 1, 'Mental Health Risk Factors: Protection of Mental Health, Prevention of Mental Illness', Prof Fareed Minhas delivered an important keynote address on identifying mental health concerns in a timely manner. Dr Sawera Mansoor expertly led the discussion as the facilitator. This session featured a distinguished panel of experts including Prof Tahir Khalili, STMU Dean of Social Sciences, Dr Aneela Maqsood, Associate Professor, Fatima Jinnah Women University, and Prof Asad Tamizuddin, Chair of the Institute of Psychiatry at Rawalpindi Medical University. The panel delved into the critical topic of mental health risk factors, emphasising the importance of safeguarding mental wellbeing and preventing mental illness, particularly in young people. The valuable insights from these experts set the tone for an informative event dedicated to raising awareness about mental health issues and promoting mental wellbeing for all.

Session 2 on the 'Challenges of Universal Access to Mental Health Care' highlighted pressing issues that hinder equitable mental health care access. Dr Zafar Mirza, Head of Public Health STMU, and Former State Minister of Health, as the Keynote Speaker, emphasised the critical role of addressing underlying systemic issues in enabling universal access to mental health services. Facilitated by Dr

Wahab Yusafzai, Consultant Psychiatrist at Shifa International, the discussion focused on the complexities of making mental health care available to all. The distinguished panel, including Mr Mashood Mirza, Federal Secretary, Dr Usman Hamdani, Director Global Institute of Human Development, and Prof Mowadat H Rana, talked about the multifaceted challenges faced in achieving universal mental health care. Their contributions highlighted the necessity for removing barriers, increasing awareness, and fostering collaboration between governments, organisations, and communities to ensure that mental health care becomes a reality for everyone, regardless of their background and circumstances. A real-life perspective was shared by AIG Helena Iqbal Saeed from the Police Service of Pakistan, indicating the need for compassionate understanding and fair treatment in all areas.

The third session titled 'Mental Health and Human Rights: Losses And Gains' provided a powerful platform for discussing the influential relationship between mental health and human rights. Keynote speaker, Barrister Sarah Belal from Justice Project Pakistan, highlighted the challenges and triumphs in upholding the human rights of individuals with mental health conditions in Pakistan. Dr Roop Zainab, Consultant Psychiatrist from The Healing Triad, facilitated the discussion. The esteemed panel included Prof Tausif Rajput, Dean Allied Health Shifa University, Prof Major Gen Muhammad Aslam, Dr Shahida Sukhera, Ministry of Human Rights, Representative, Human Rights Commission of Pakistan, and Dr Taha Sabri, Pakistan Mental Health Coalition. Together, they explored the instrumental factors in advocating for a more inclusive and compassionate society that recognises and upholds the rights of every individual, irrespective of their mental health status.

In a vote of thanks, Prof Nasim Chaudhry, CEO PILL, appreciated all facilitators, panellists, speakers, and guests for coming together to advocate for an important aspect of mental health support. She reiterated our aim to raise awareness, foster empathy, and promote a rights-based approach to mental health, highlighting the importance of equity and dignity for all.

