



## FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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### BREAKING THE SILENCE ON SUICIDE AMONG UGANDAN SECONDARY SCHOOL STUDENTS: CALL FOR URGENT ACTION

An estimated 45,800 adolescents die by suicide globally each year — more than one every 11 minutes. Suicide is as well the fifth leading cause of death among adolescents aged 10–19 (WHO, 2022). A project baseline study conducted in 2023 by Mental Health Uganda, in partnership with SOS Children’s Villages, revealed that 20% of students aged 13–19 across eight schools in Gulu and Wakiso had contemplated suicide. The project’s 2024 midterm evaluation further found that the common mental health issues reported by students included academic stress and lack of school fees (44%), anxiety (19%), bullying (22%), depression (19%), suicidal thoughts (5%), and family issues such as domestic violence (26%).

In 2024, Mental Health Uganda’s toll-free counselling line recorded 1,023 cases of suicidal ideation (679 males — 66.4%, 344 females — 33.6%). Youth were the most affected, with 44.5% aged 25–30, 32.4% aged 18–24, 12.4% aged 31–35, and 10.7% in other age groups.

Mental Health Uganda is deeply concerned about the sharp rise in student suicides across the country, and more so in some of the most prominent secondary schools. The loss of a young life to suicide is a devastating experience for families, schools, and communities, leaving behind unanswered questions, sense of guilt, stigma, and hopelessness. To worsen this, suicide remains a criminal offence under Section 210 of the Penal Code Act. Recent research reports reducing cases of suicides in countries where laws penalizing attempted suicide have been scrapped. Mental Health Uganda calls upon the State to urgently consider the decriminalization of suicide in Uganda. This will enable people with mental health problems to access the timely support they so badly need.

Our Peer-Led Youth Mental Health Project in eight schools in Gulu City and Wakiso, has yielded promising results. Six students (5 females, 1 male) who attempted suicide were identified and supported to full recovery. Additionally, statistics from our midterm evaluation indicate that 92% of students reported increased mental health awareness, 96% chose to abstain from alcohol and substance use, and 38% became more mindful of their physical well-being. A total of 1,136 students (583 females, 553 males) with mental health concerns received Psychological First Aid, psychoeducation, and referrals to professional care. Teachers reported an

8.4/10 confidence level in supporting students and colleagues with mental health issues, while 88% of students felt comfortable discussing mental health with peers, teachers, or professionals.

In light of these findings, Mental Health Uganda asserts that prevention of student suicides is possible with targeted interventions. We call upon the Ministry of Education and Sports, alongside all relevant stakeholders, to adopt the following **recommendations**:

- Popularize and enforce Circular 20: “Prioritization of Mental Health Education in Learning Institutions.” Headteachers should promote psychoeducation and establish safe mental health spaces within schools to normalize mental health conversations. This will expand on the narrow scope of just employing counselors in schools.
- Strengthen school capacity to address student mental health issues promptly and professionally, with empathy and confidentiality. Integrate mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) into teacher training and ongoing Continuous Professional Development (CPD).
- Review the new secondary school curriculum to identify and mitigate potential risks to students' mental well-being.
- Foster stronger school-parent collaborations to support students' mental health. Promote awareness, encourage positive parent-child relationships, and enhance linkages to professional care.
- Establish school-based mental health clubs to build peer support networks. In one of our interventions, 68% of students sought help from Mental Health Champions — peers trained by MHU to provide mental health support.

Mental Health Uganda offers a toll-free helpline at 0800 21 21 21, providing free and confidential counselling, available Monday to Friday, 8:30 am to 5:00 pm.

Mental Health Uganda (MHU) is a leading non-governmental organization advocating for the rights and well-being of people with mental health conditions. Through advocacy, education, and direct support services, MHU works to build an inclusive society where mental health is prioritized, and considers people with mental health conditions as persons of great value.

For free and confidential professional counselling,  
please call 0800 212121 Monday to Friday  
(8:30am to 5:00pm).

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