

Dan A. Taylor - COMMUNITY AWARENESS VIS-À-VIS PSYCHIATRIC ABUSES IN GHANA

I am really delighted to make this presentation at this conference in Toronto albeit I am not physically present to do so. It is a crying shame that due to very unfortunate circumstances bordering largely on discrimination and oppressive policies by the Canadian High Commission in Ghana, I was refused a visa to travel to participate in this conference.

The organizing committee did what it could to reverse this regrettable decision but its efforts did not yield any positive results. I, on my part also wrote an appeal letter against the decision which even at this moment had not even acknowledged. I know and believe that in course of time, justice and fairness will prevail in this matter as I am determined to fight this modern slavery and stark discrimination against Africans intending to travel to Canada or nay part of the world. I trust that you would all join in this fight to ensure that all human beings regardless of colour, race or creed are treated fairly and equally!

I must commence this presentation by stating that the background to this chosen topic hinges on the abuses in the mental health system in Ghana where in some situations people are sent to the psychiatric hospitals very much against their will and subjected to all manner of bad treatment.

MindFreedom Ghana as an organization that operates in the communities with our core activities being Awareness Creation, Prevention, Advocacy and Research reaches out directly to relatives and friends of persons with mental disorders by getting them to be involved in any decision regarding their welfare. We strongly insist on recognition of the rights of such persons whereby their needs and wishes ought to be respected without anything unduly being imposed on them.

Peculiar to the Ghanaian society, one has parents, grand parents, siblings, uncles, aunts, cousins and even friends to about one's problems and expects solutions / relief rather than the unfriendly 'strange' persons in the psychiatric hospitals to deal with.

Issues of stigmatization as well as ingrained cultural beliefs in Ghana and indeed Africa about mental disabilities in part happen to be the reason for some of these abuses inherent in the mental health system in Ghana. Situations abound currently where persons with mental disorders are dragged against their will and consciousness to spiritual camps and fetish priests to exorcise supposed demonic spirits.

In our community awareness projects, we have organized sensitization activities such as getting some of our members to talk about their experiences and how they went about situations when they had problems with their mental health.

Some of the things they have talked about inter alia related to what and how they might have developed the problems, how their family cum friends treated them, the sort of treatment they had had at the psychiatric hospitals and how they are perceived to be in their present state.

To make these activities lively and involving, we use drama sketches and traditional Ghanaian dances to drive our points home. Some photos from these activities are available for participants to see.

Still on community awareness programmes, we have appeared on both radio and TV to sensitize the public on their mental health needs as well as rights of persons with mental disabilities.

In our appearance in the media, we have raised issues about getting our country to ratify the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. Ghana has signed the Convention but yet to ratify.

It is pertinent to mention that on abuses at the psychiatric hospitals, we have had occasion some time ago in 2007 to go undercover to take some photos at the main psychiatric hospital located in Accra, Ghana's capital. There three psychiatric hospitals in Ghana. Some of the images captured were quite disturbing and most dehumanizing.

There were scenes of some persons on admission there being virtually naked and sitting in the open in the blazing tropical sun. We also got scenes of gates to the wards which had strong chains with padlocks affixed to them. There were also some scenes from the wards which revealed worn out beds with torn foam mattresses. Some of the photos are available to look at.

Having got those photos, we wrote articles in the newspapers against such flagrant human rights violations and keeping largely against their wishes and in such degrading conditions. We also went on air speaking against these human rights violations.

During our Mad Pride street march in 2007, we had placards with inscriptions against these abuses in our psychiatric hospitals. We also presented a petition to the Minister of Health on these human rights abuses.

It must be noted that we have come across some challenges bordering largely on apathy and stigma for associating ourselves with persons with mental disorders in our communities. These pertained to sections of the public in the communities as well as government institutions. Another challenge also relates to financial constraints where we are not able to reach out adequately to all the communities where we operate and even beyond.

I must intimate that we are convinced beyond every reasonable doubt that our activities / efforts at curbing psychiatric abuses in our country will best yield results when Ghana ratifies the UN Convention. Provisions such as Articles 12 and 25 in the Convention will be employed to ensure that persons with psychosocial disabilities choose the sort and form of treatment they desire.

We are of the strong conviction that we shall have the clout, legal backing and an unfettered capacity to make noises that would ensure that psychiatric abuses prevalent in the psychiatric hospitals are curtailed if not controlled.

To this end, we have since last year organized series of activities aimed at educating the citizenry on the provisions of the Convention and following it up this year with advocacy for its ratification in our country by the end of the year. These activities are currently being sponsored by the Disability Rights Fund.

In passing I wish to observe on behalf of my organization that psychiatric abuses are condemnable and completely repugnant to human dignity.

We from the developing world are more vulnerable because of the systems / beliefs prevailing. It is however not beyond repair to correct such abuses. We do need your support in various forms to be able to achieve our objectives.

To this end I would like to use this forum to appeal to you as individuals and / or institutions to support with funding and / or materials to enable us operate smoothly. That without support from funding agencies / institutions abroad, my organization for instance would not have been where it is right now. Our very existence and performance to date has largely been from the support received from outside Ghana's borders.

Let me take this opportunity to wish this conference every success in all its deliberations and pray that the outcome will adequately address the theme. Albeit I rue my absence from being in Toronto to join you physically and meet new people from different parts of the world, I must state strongly that I am with you in spirit.

I wish each and all well and optimum success in all your undertakings. I pray that you all get back safely to where you came from. I believe that another opportunity will come for us to meet sometime in the future.

Before ending I wish to thank the organizing committee for making every effort to get me to be at the conference, but enemies of progress and humanity have made this simply impossible.

Thank you once more and may God richly bless all of you.

I will say in my language "AYEKOO" to all participants!!!



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