



**RWANDA HEALTH INITIATIVE
FOR YOUTH AND WOMEN**

ADVANCING MENTAL HEALTH, PSYCHOSOCIAL WELL-BEING, AND RESILIENCE AMONG ADOLESCENTS, WOMEN, AND VULNERABLE POPULATIONS

Objective

To strengthen Mental Health and Psychosocial Support (MHPSS) services within primary healthcare facilities, youth centers, and community-based systems by enhancing the capacity of healthcare providers, promoting mental health awareness, leveraging digital health technologies, preventing risky behaviors among adolescents and young people, improving the early identification and management of mental health conditions, and expanding access to quality, client-centered mental health services for vulnerable populations.

Context and Rationale

Mental health is a fundamental component of overall health and well-being and is essential for achieving positive social, educational, and economic outcomes. Mental health disorders including depression, anxiety, trauma-related disorders, substance use disorders, and suicidal behavior are among the leading causes of disability worldwide and disproportionately affect adolescents, young people, women; facing social and economic vulnerabilities. These conditions are often linked to poverty, gender inequality, violence, unintended pregnancy, HIV, sexual violence, social exclusion, and limited access to supportive services.

Although Rwanda has made significant progress in strengthening mental health services, access to quality Mental Health and Psychosocial Support (MHPSS) remains limited for many vulnerable populations, particularly at the primary healthcare and community levels. Persistent challenges include shortages of trained providers, inadequate integration of mental health within Sexual and Reproductive Health services, stigma and discrimination, weak referral mechanisms, limited community awareness, and inadequate early identification of common mental health conditions.

Adolescents and young people are particularly vulnerable to mental health challenges arising from substance abuse, violence, school dropout, family instability, and economic hardship. Similarly, survivors of gender-based violence, sex workers, street-connected children, adolescent mothers, and other vulnerable groups frequently experience multiple and overlapping psychosocial challenges that require comprehensive, trauma-informed, and integrated care.

In response to these challenges, the Rwanda Health Initiative for Youth and Women (RHIYW), in collaboration with the Ministry of Health, Rwanda Biomedical Centre (RBC), district health authorities, and other partners, implemented an Mental Health and Psychosocial Support initiative between 2019 and 2025.



The program embedded mental health services within SRH services; including comprehensive Abortion Care (CAC) in primary public health facilities, and youth-friendly SRHR services in youth centers, and community outreach interventions to improve access to quality mental health services and for mental health awareness.

STRATEGIC INTERVENTIONS

□ Capacity Building of Healthcare Providers

We strengthened the competencies of frontline healthcare providers through competency-based training in Mental Health and Psychosocial Support. A total of **89 mid-level healthcare providers** from **43 primary healthcare facilities** providing Sexual and Reproductive Health services were trained in basic psychosocial counseling, effective communication, client confidentiality, adolescent-friendly and trauma-informed care, mental health screening, management of common mental health conditions, referral and follow-up, and provider self-care. The training improved providers' confidence and capacity to deliver integrated, compassionate, and client-centered mental health services within routine primary healthcare.

□ Integration of Mental Health into SRH Services

Mental health screening and psychosocial assessment were integrated into Sexual and Reproductive Health consultations, particularly Comprehensive Abortion Care services, to facilitate the early identification of clients experiencing depression, anxiety, trauma, substance use disorders, or other psychosocial challenges. More than **3,000 vulnerable girls and women** from rural communities benefited from integrated services that combined reproductive healthcare with mental health assessment, counseling, and referral.

□ Mental Health Promotion and Prevention of Risk Behaviors

We implemented community-based mental health promotion activities through youth centers, peer education networks, and community dialogue sessions. These interventions reached more than **5,000 adolescents and young people** with education on emotional well-being, substance abuse prevention, healthy relationships, resilience, and positive coping mechanisms. The initiative contributed to improving mental health literacy while promoting healthy lifestyles and reducing behaviors associated with poor mental health outcomes.

□ Psychosocial Support for Vulnerable Populations

Recognizing the importance of peer support in promoting recovery and resilience, we established psychosocial support groups within youth centers. Through peer counseling, group therapy, facilitated discussions, and experience sharing, more than **1,000 vulnerable adolescents and young people**, including survivors of gender-based violence, adolescent mothers, sex workers, and street-connected youth, received ongoing psychosocial support. These safe spaces strengthened social connectedness, reduced isolation, promoted resilience, and facilitated referral to specialized services when required.



❑ Mentorship, Supportive Supervision, and Quality Improvement

To ensure sustained quality of care, we implemented continuous mentorship, supportive supervision, and quality improvement initiatives in collaboration with the Ministry of Health and Rwanda Biomedical Centre. Joint mentorship visits were conducted across **66 primary healthcare facilities**, focusing on clinical coaching, case reviews, quality improvement planning, mental health screening, referral systems, and adherence to national service delivery standards. These interventions strengthened institutional capacity and promoted the integration of Mental Health and Psychosocial Support into routine primary healthcare services.

Key Achievements

Indicator	Achievement
Healthcare providers (nurses, midwives, medical doctors) trained in MHPSS	89
Primary healthcare facilities strengthened	66
Districts reached	5
Adolescents and young people reached through mental health awareness activities	5,000+
Vulnerable individuals participating in psychosocial support groups	1,000+
Girls and women receiving integrated SRHR and mental health services	3,000+
Healthcare providers receiving mentorship	120+
GBV survivors receiving psychosocial support	3,500+

KEY OUTPUTS

The initiative strengthened provider capacity in Mental Health and Psychosocial Support through competency-based training, introduced standardized counseling and mental health screening tools within primary healthcare facilities, integrated mental health services into routine SRH care, established community-based psychosocial support groups, strengthened referral pathways between communities and health facilities, and institutionalized supportive supervision and quality improvement mechanisms to sustain service quality.

OUTCOMES

The program strengthened the delivery of integrated Mental Health and Psychosocial Support services within primary healthcare facilities. Healthcare providers demonstrated improved confidence and competence in counseling, identifying, managing, and referring clients with common mental health conditions. Integration of mental health within SRHR services increased access to comprehensive care for vulnerable women and adolescents while strengthening continuity of care through improved referral systems.



Community awareness initiatives increased knowledge of common mental health conditions, reduced stigma associated with mental illness, and encouraged positive help-seeking behaviors among adolescents and young people. Psychosocial support groups further strengthened peer networks, reduced social isolation, enhanced resilience, and improved emotional well-being among vulnerable populations.

DEVELOPMENT IMPACT

The initiative significantly strengthened Rwanda's primary healthcare system by integrating Mental Health and Psychosocial Support within existing Sexual and Reproductive Health services. By building the capacity of healthcare providers, strengthening referral systems, promoting community awareness, and expanding trauma-informed care, the program improved access to quality mental health services for adolescents, women, survivors of gender-based violence, sex workers, street-connected children, adolescent mothers, and other vulnerable populations.

Beyond improving clinical service delivery, the intervention addressed the social determinants of mental health through community engagement, peer support, and integrated service delivery. These approaches contributed to improved psychological well-being, increased resilience, reduced stigma, strengthened social support networks, and enhanced quality of life for vulnerable individuals and communities.

Sustainability and Systems Strengthening

The initiative promoted long-term sustainability by integrating Mental Health and Psychosocial Support (MHPSS) into routine primary healthcare services; Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR) programs, and youth-friendly services delivered through public youth centers within existing government systems. By strengthening institutional capacity through continuous mentorship, supportive supervision, quality improvement initiatives, and the integration of standardized mental health screening and referral mechanisms, the intervention enhanced the ability of health facilities to provide quality, client-centered mental health services. In addition, ongoing mental health promotion and education for adolescents and young people attending public youth centers has helped institutionalize preventive interventions, increase mental health awareness, reduce stigma, and encourage early help-seeking behaviors. These efforts, combined with close collaboration with the Ministry of Health, Rwanda Biomedical Centre (RBC), district health authorities, and community structures, have strengthened local ownership and created a sustainable foundation for the continued delivery and expansion of integrated mental health service.



Lessons Learned

Implementation of the initiative demonstrated that integrating Mental Health and Psychosocial Support (MHPSS) into Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR) services at the primary healthcare level improves access to comprehensive, person-centered care and strengthens continuity of care for vulnerable populations. Building the capacity of healthcare providers through competency-based training, continuous mentorship, and supportive supervision is essential for maintaining high-quality mental health services. Community engagement, peer support groups, and youth-friendly approaches proved effective in reducing stigma, increasing mental health awareness, strengthening resilience, and promoting timely care-seeking among adolescents and young people. Strong referral networks between communities, youth centers, and health facilities enhanced access to specialized mental health services and improved follow-up for clients requiring additional care. The experience also highlighted the need for innovative approaches, including digital mental health solutions, to further expand access to mental health information, screening, counseling, follow-up, and referral services, particularly for underserved and hard-to-reach populations.

