

It's time for a gender responsive Budget that focuses on mental health

WE are on the road to Budget 2022, and the 12th Malaysia Plan has just been announced. After close to two years battling a pandemic, we are heading to recovery. Will Malaysia finally prioritise mental health?

Rates of mental illness have only soared following the onset of the pandemic, with those reporting suicidal tendencies increasing 30% to 40% from 2020 to 2021. Suicide cases for the first five months of 2021 already comprised over 70% of the annual cases in the past two years, and stands at an average of roughly four suicide cases a day.

This is extremely worrisome when compared to previous years, where, on average, there were less than two cases per day. Research has demonstrated an escalating progression of mental health disorders in Malaysia last year, with an increase of depression rates within the population from 20.9% to 59.2% and anxiety from 32.3% to 55.1%.

A clear action plan is needed to ensure the wellbeing of the people, particularly at this point in time. We have to address the severe shortage of psychosocial support in Malaysia and we need to very urgently decriminalise suicide.

In Women's Aid Organisation's recent budget report, we found that Malaysia's mental health spending tends to hover around 1% of our national health budget. This is markedly less than the World Health Organisation reports of global average spending on mental health – which is typically 2.4% of a country's national health budget. For example, neighbouring Singapore apportioned 3% of its national health budget towards mental health while Australia spends a whopping 5% of its national health budget on mental health.

This is reflected in how Singapore has its own mental health taskforce, while Australia has shifted its priorities to include public well-being, aiming to prevent mental health issues, and make mental health services accessible for children and adults. We need to step up our mental health spending to at least 2.4% of our national health budget if we want to adequately address and mitigate the negative impact Covid-19 has had on our mental health.

While a bigger mental health budget will benefit everyone, it is particularly crucial for those who are more vulnerable including women and youth, who according to research done by organisations including WHO, tend to experience higher rates of mental illness compared to the rest of the population.

Budget allocations that ensure a gender-equitable distribution of resources and considers a group's specific vulnerabilities is called gender-responsive budgeting. A gender-responsive budget works for all, from women and girls to boys and men – and this includes responding to the pressing need for increased mental health support.

Increasing women's mental health allocations can prevent violence

The link between women's rights and mental health may not be clear at first glance. However, an increased mental health budget may, in fact, both prevent violence and help women in situations of domestic violence build the confidence to leave.

Longitudinal studies suggest there is a cyclical relationship between intimate partner violence and mental health illness, whereby the mental health impacts of intimate partner violence puts women at increased risk of further abuse.

According to the WHO, women shoulder such a heavy burden of mental health primarily because they are vulnerable to and are more likely to experience gender-based violence in their lifetime.

AWAM's recent survey, demonstrating how over 50% of Malaysian women have experienced some type of sexual harassment in their lives further highlights how prevalent and normalised gender-based violence is in our society.

Domestic violence (DV) and gender-based violence (GBV) are often not easily resolved by providing shelters and safe spaces. It is a complex and cyclical issue that needs to be addressed from all angles. Adequate mental health support can help break cycles of violence.

Women survivors who seek support from services have recently experienced high levels of abuse, depression, anxiety, and especially PTSD.

The high psychological morbidity in this population means that trauma-informed psychological support is needed for survivors who seek support from domestic violence services. This is why Women's Aid Organisation recommends a specific allocation of RM9.3mil towards training an additional 500 mental health professionals who are equipped to counsel and provide interventions for Domestic Violence and Gender-based Violence survivors.

An adequate mental health strategy must be a part of the national plan to combat domestic violence and would benefit from a government expansion of mental health services in Budget 2022.

A robust, responsive mental health system also must translate to affordability and accessibility. Affordability and accessibility are big barriers to seeking help, which is why investment in community mental health centres are crucial.

There exists Health Ministry guidelines for implementing community mental health centres, known as MENTARIs, which demonstrates an understanding of the necessity of these services. However, the slow rate of expansion is concerning, especially following the known detrimental impact the pandemic has had on mental health.

There must be a concentrated effort to ensure an adequate amount of MENTARIs are accessible to the public. Malaysia has 25 MENTARIs, with at least one per state, which is a good start. While there are plans to expand this to 40 MENTARIs by 2030, this is only an expansion of one to two MENTARIs per year, which simply isn't enough in light of the fast escalation of mental health issues.

Given this, we propose allocating RM50mil to ensure at least five new MENTARIs are opened next year. This must also act as a sustained allocation until 2030 to ensure these mental health resources are available to all regardless of background and income.

What does it cost our economy?

Beyond an empathetic, needs-based argument, increased spending on mental health also makes economic sense. Estimates on the lost productivity from mental health issues amounts to RM14.46bil, or 1% of the Malaysian GDP, while research by the WHO demonstrated that, on average, for every US\$1 (RM4.16) spent on mental health, US\$4 (RM16.64) was returned to the economy from increased productivity.

Finally, the data and research available only gives a glimpse into the full scale of the mental health crisis in Malaysia. The last prevalence study conducted by the Health Ministry was published in 2016 and already identified several areas of concern, including increased suicidality in the population. However, the post-pandemic prevalence remains unclear.

An expanded budget can give the resources for proper data collection, which will enable us to understand the precise scale of the mental health crisis and help with a plan of action for addressing these issues. In order to do so, we also need consistent data that is sex-disaggregated, and for those who are collating and sharing this data, such as Department of Statistics, Ministries and Police (PDRM) to understand the importance of this.

Mental healthcare is healthcare and should not be neglected as we move towards recovery. Our mental healthcare needs must be addressed especially if our goal is to build resilience in a post-pandemic society. Therefore, we urge the government to expand its mental health spending and respond to the rakyat's urgent need for mental health support and infrastructure before it is too late.

<https://www.thestar.com.my/news/focus/2021/10/07/its-time-for-a-gender-responsive-budget-that-focuses-on-mental-health>