



Statement to the 74th Session of the World Health Assembly, 24 May to 1 June 2021
on agenda item 18. Mental health preparedness for and response to the COVID-19 pandemic

welcome WHO's commitment to mental health preparedness and response during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Like COVID-19 itself, the mental health burden of this pandemic has not been distributed equally, but rather has been disproportionately borne by the most vulnerable, including the unemployed and precariously employed, sexual and gender minorities, and those exposed to violence, displacement and insecurity.

Frontline health workers have been hard hit. Poor working conditions, including inadequate PPE, heightened workloads, lack of psychosocial support and childcare services have increased stress, burnout and depression. Many have left the health workforce and some have even taken their own lives. Health workers are at the centre of the COVID-19 response and we urge WHO to develop guidelines on providing mental health and psychosocial support to them, particularly during these stressful times.

The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted the mental health of all age groups. Children have been deprived of social interaction, food and essential services due to school closures. Elderly people have faced isolation and loneliness as social distancing requirements have limited social contact.

Countries should ensure that human rights are protected when implementing COVID-19 containment measures. Human rights violations have risen during the pandemic. There are reports of police brutality and excessive violence to enforce curfews and physical distancing orders, with significant negative impacts on victims' mental health.

Mental ill health – including the crises of anxiety, depression, PTSD and suicide identified in the DG's report – are largely products of the social, political and economic systems in which we live. Individualized proposals are not enough. In addition to improvements in mental health services, true public mental health requires addressing the core social determinants of mental health, and the structural inequalities generated by neoliberal capitalism.