



Centre for Health Ethics Law and Development



# Understanding Mental Health in Informal Workplaces: Insights from the Busiest Market in Lagos

## 1. Introduction

In Nigeria, approximately one in four individuals, equating to around 50 million people, reportedly live with some form of mental illness.[1] However, the country faces a significant shortage of mental health professionals, with only about 250 psychiatrists serving a population of over 200 million. [2] This shortage highlights the urgent need for improved mental health services and support systems, particularly in sectors where the strain on mental well-being is often overlooked.

Informal workplaces, such as street vendors selling food and goods, domestic workers employed in private homes, seasonal agricultural labourers and artisans, are a significant part of Nigeria's economy. According to the National Bureau of Statistics, about 92.3% of workers in Nigeria are engaged in informal employment.[3] These workplaces often lack formal structures and regulatory protections, leading to various challenges for workers and their mental health. Additionally, many informal workers face long and irregular working hours without adequate rest, contributing to stress and burnout.

Mental health in informal workplaces is essential for several reasons. The informal sector provides work to a significant part of the population especially marginalized groups, and those who may not have access to formal employment, including women and people living with disabilities. The informal sector also often complements the formal economy by providing essential services, including food supply, transportation, and maintenance.

To mark the 2024 World Mental Health Day, themed "*It is Time to Prioritize Mental Health in the Workplace*", Centre for Health Ethics Law and Development (CHELD) explored the realities of these workers. CHELD visited Balogun Market, the busiest market in Lagos.[4] Located on Lagos Island, Balogun Market is a centre for various goods, including clothing, accessories, food and household items. It attracts an estimated 50,000 visitors daily, making it a vital source of income for many families.[5] Through conversations with street vendors, artisans, market workers, and domestic workers, CHELD sought to uncover their perceptions of mental health, their daily stressors and the barriers they face in accessing mental health support.

[1] World Health Organization. (2019). Nigeria has a mental health problem. Al Jazeera. Retrieved from <https://www.aljazeera.com/economy/2019/10/2/nigeria-has-a-mental-health-problem>.

[2] Fadele KP, Igwe SC, Toluwalogo N-O, Udokang EI, Ogaya JB, Lucero-Prisno DE. Mental health challenges in Nigeria: Bridging the gap between demand and resources. Cambridge Prisms: Global Mental Health. 2024;11:e29. doi:10.1017/gmh.2024.19

[3] National Bureau of Statistics. (2023). Labour Force Statistics: Unemployment and Underemployment Report (Q3 2023). Retrieved from <https://nigerianstat.gov.ng/download/1241455#:~:text=The%20share%20of%20employed%20persons,92.7%25%20in%20the%20preVIOUS%20quarter.>

[4] Private Property Nigeria. (2023) Top 10 most popular markets in Lagos: Full list. Retrieved from <https://www.privateproperty.com.ng/news/top-10-most-popular-markets-in-lagos-full-list/>.

[5] Ibid





## 2. Knowledge of Mental Health

Our discussions revealed a deep disconnect between informal workers and mental health awareness. Many equated mental health with mental illness, a misconception that fuels the stigma. When asked "What does mental health mean to you?", many workers equated it with "being mental". They were quick to assert that they did not suffer from any mental health issues. This immediate dismissal of their mental health highlighted a significant gap in awareness. For many, mental health was perceived as an occasional fleeting moment of frustration or anger, everyone experienced when pushed to the edge. This underscores a critical need for education on mental health, especially in informal settings where these misconceptions abound. They also associated mental illness with something lasting a lifetime, whereas physical illnesses were seen as more straightforward to treat, with recovery being much more attainable. This perception led many to prioritize physical ailments, viewing them as temporary setbacks, while mental health challenges were viewed with more apprehension and fear due to their perceived permanence.

## 3. Causes of Stress in the Workplace

Financial difficulties in business incurred through debts, high dollar exchange rates and low sales were frequently cited as a pervasive source of anxiety among workers. The ongoing economic challenges facing the country exacerbate these financial strains, leading to a pronounced impact on both customers and sales. As disposable incomes dwindle and the cost of living rises, customers are increasingly hesitant to spend, creating a challenging environment for vendors who depend on daily sales for their livelihoods. Moreover, some workers revealed that their stressors often originated from home, significantly impacting their performance and overall well-being at work. Issues such as marital stress, familial obligations, and domestic responsibilities often weigh heavily on their minds.

Further, in the absence of standard operating procedures (SOPs) governing workplace behavior, the nature of communication among workers, bosses, and customers can vary dramatically. Many workers reported that their bosses and customers speaking to them harshly leaves them feeling undermined. When both bosses and customers contribute to a culture of disrespect, it creates a challenging environment where workers feel trapped and undervalued. The compounded stress from these interactions can lead to increased anxiety and decreased job satisfaction, ultimately impacting their mental health and overall quality of life.

Finding reliable staff also emerged as a major concern, with many expressing frustrations over the difficulty of securing trustworthy employees. For many informal workers and business owners, especially those managing small enterprises, unreliable staff can disrupt operations, increase workload, and create uncertainty. Without trustworthy employees, there is constant worry about whether tasks will be completed properly, or if they will even show up for work. This often results in employers taking on extra duties to cover for staff, which adds to their stress levels and affects their productivity. Moreover, the emotional toll of constantly needing to monitor or correct staff behavior can lead to frustration and burnout. The general trend of dishonesty among staff can also lead their bosses to endeavor to monitor them properly. This can increase the stress level of bosses in informal workplaces.

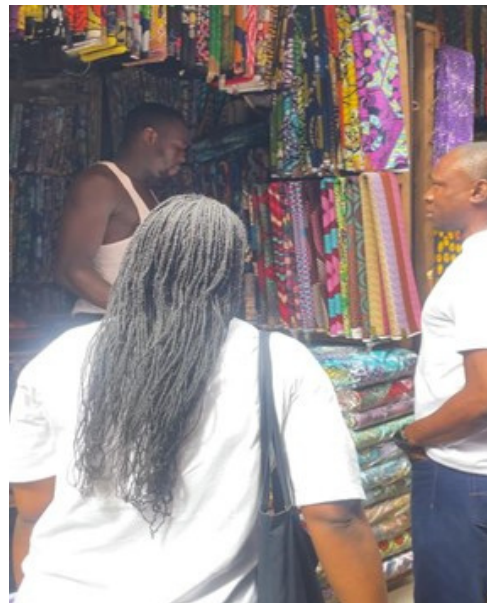
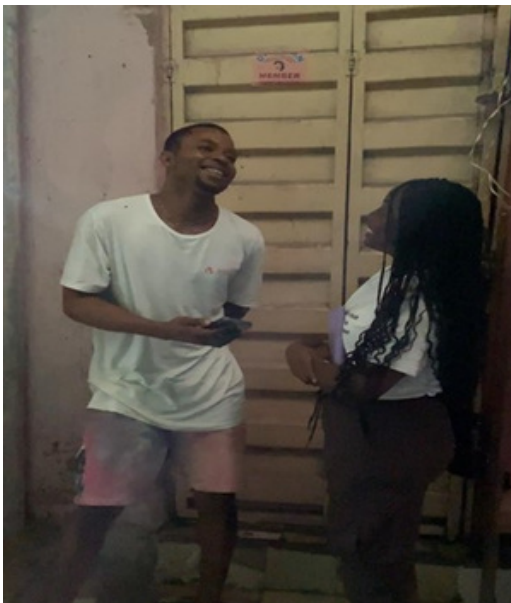
For those whose jobs require extensive movement within congested market areas and carrying heavy loads, the physical environment, and congestion adds another layer of physical and emotional stress.



#### 4. Coping Mechanisms with Stressors

As we explored how workers cope with these pressures, we discovered that faith plays a significant role. Many rely on prayer, viewing their challenges as temporary and manageable through spiritual resilience. Some mentioned making a habit of "leaving work at work" as a means of setting intentional boundaries to protect one's mental health, particularly in informal workplaces where work can easily spill over into personal time.

Conversations with family and friends, listening to music, and engaging in casual socializing emerged as common coping mechanisms. Some workers also mentioned resorting to sleeping, drinking or venting their frustrations on others. However, despite these supports, a prevailing tendency to keep personal struggles private often prevented workers from sharing their burdens with those around them due to fear of betrayal and personal information being used against them. Generally, improving the economic conditions of the country was viewed as pivotal to alleviating many of their stressors. Some also suggested that incorporating stress-relief activities in their workplaces such as having a "workplace comedian" or organizing fun, engaging activities could significantly enhance their mental well-being.



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## 5. Willingness to Support Others

Although, many expressed reluctance to share their struggles with others, a notable number of workers demonstrated a strong willingness to support colleagues facing challenging times. They emphasized their readiness to listen, offer advice, and provide encouragement whenever someone reaches out for help. This willingness to assist stems from a sense that workers recognize that everyone encounters difficulties at some point and being in business together they share similar struggles. They voiced a commitment to prioritizing understanding the issues at hand, taking the time to engage in meaningful conversations that delve into the root causes of distress.

## 6. Willingness to Engage with Professionals

Interestingly, while formal mental health resources are lacking in these informal workplaces, workers expressed a willingness to engage with professionals or therapists. Many workers highlighted that simply expressing their feelings allows them to gain clarity and perspective on their challenges. Also, the assurance that their information and conversations will be kept private serves as an added advantage, encouraging more workers to open up about their struggles.

## 7. Conclusion

In conclusion, addressing mental health in informal workplaces is crucial, particularly as we recognize the diverse challenges faced by workers in Nigeria. The insights gathered from our discussions reveal a pressing need for education, support systems, and open dialogue about mental well-being. While faith and community connections provide some solace, the stigma surrounding mental health often prevents individuals from seeking the help they need. By prioritizing mental health and implementing the recommended strategies, we can create an environment where informal workers feel empowered to share their struggles, access necessary resources, and ultimately enhance their overall well-being. As we commemorate World Mental Health Day, let us commit to fostering a culture of understanding and support, ensuring that mental health is viewed as a fundamental aspect of our collective health and productivity.



## 8. Recommendations

- 1. Education and Awareness Campaigns:** There is a need to implement community-based educational programs including in pidgin and local languages to demystify mental health, aiming to inform informal workers about the meaning, and importance of mental well-being, the signs of mental health issues and available support resources. This can also be achieved via the use of infographics in the marketplace and awareness creation for the governing bodies such as market unions/ leaderships and informal associations like the Association of tailors, hair dresser, plumbers, repairers etc.
- 2. Training of Employees and Governing Bodies:** There is a need to provide training for employers and governing bodies in the informal sectors on effective communication, empathy, and conflict resolution skills to foster a supportive workplace environment.
- 3. Access to Professional Support:** There is a need to establish partnerships with mental health professionals and NGOs to create accessible counselling services tailored to the needs of informal workers. Consider mobile clinics or pop-up counselling sessions in busy marketplaces to reach those who may not seek help otherwise.
- 4. Inclusion of Mental Health in Health Insurance:** This would also ensure that mental health is given equal importance to physical health, encouraging workers to address both aspects of their well-being. With proper coverage, individuals would have access to therapists, counsellors, and other mental health services, helping to prevent burnout, stress, and more severe mental health conditions from going untreated.
- 5. Peer Support Groups:** Encourage the formation of peer support groups within their unions where informal workers can share their experiences and coping strategies in a safe, judgment-free space. Facilitating discussions led by trained facilitators can help reduce stigma and foster community support.
- 6. Stress Relief Initiatives:** Introduce workplace stress relief initiatives, such as mindfulness workshops, relaxation techniques, or access to recreational activities that promote mental well-being. This could include organizing group outings or wellness events within the community.
- 7. Collaboration with Local Organizations:** Collaborate with local organizations and community leaders to create awareness around mental health resources and the importance of seeking help. Community engagement can help normalize conversations about mental health.
- 8. Policy Advocacy:** Advocate for policy changes that recognize and support the mental health needs of informal workers. This includes pushing for regulations that establish basic workplace protections and access to mental health services in informal sectors.

**9. Resource Availability:** Create a centralized resource hub, online or in physical locations, where informal workers can easily access information about mental health services, hotlines, and support groups.

**10. Financial Education and Support:** Address financial stressors by providing financial literacy programs and resources that help workers manage their finances better, potentially reducing anxiety related to financial instability.

**11. Encouraging Open Dialogue:** Foster an environment that encourages open discussions about mental health among workers, employers, and community members. This can help reduce stigma and create a culture of understanding and support.



## **Centre for Health Ethics Law and Development**

Suite 202, Dew International Complex  
58 Omorinre Johnson Street, Lekki Phase 1  
Lagos, Nigeria  
[www.healthlaw.com.ng](http://www.healthlaw.com.ng)  
[info@healthlaw.com.ng](mailto:info@healthlaw.com.ng)

