



PRESS RELEASE

New report puts a spotlight on the 20 countries where suicide remains illegal and the urgent need to decriminalise suicide to reduce stigma and save lives

8 SEPTEMBER 2021, LONDON: A new report examines the 20 countries where suicide and suicidal behaviour remains a criminal offence and where individuals who attempt to take their own lives risk severe penalties for themselves and even their families. Globally over 700,000 people die by suicide every year - in 2019 more and 1 in every 100 deaths worldwide was due to suicide. And for every one person who dies, 20 more have attempted suicide.

The report by United for Global Mental Health working with the International Association for Suicide Prevention (IASP) examines where, why and the implications of criminalisation of suicide, providing up to date evidence on suicide legislation and a profile of the situation in each of the 20 countries. Maximum penalties range from 1-3 years imprisonment and fines of up to US\$2000. Many of the laws allow for children to be punished and a number have legislation in place as a legacy of laws from the Colonial period - some as old as 160 years - and a lack of mental health reform. The stigma surrounding suicide, particularly where it is illegal, continues to make the subject taboo and discourages communities from talking openly about the issue.

“The criminalization of suicide is counter productive: it does not deter people from taking their lives. Instead it increases stigma, prevents people from seeking help in a moment of acute crisis, and deters communities from offering life-saving mental health support”, said Sarah Kline, CEO of United for Global Mental Health.

The report was produced with the support of TrustLaw, the Thomson Reuters Foundation's legal pro bono service and an international law firm who conducted the research. It is being released during 2021's Suicide Prevention Awareness Month as a tool to help campaigners seeking to decriminalise suicide.

The report also shows that many countries have made progress in their efforts to reduce the number of deaths by suicide, with legislation successfully repealed or superseded by new laws in the Cayman Islands, Cyprus, Lebanon and India.

“We have a historic opportunity to press for reform,” stressed Sarah Kline. “This year health ministers agreed at the World Health Assembly that decriminalisation of suicide is an important policy measure to reducing suicide rates. Now it is time the remaining countries



reform their laws. I hope the report will inspire an end to criminalising suicide and greater action to save lives."

Suicide is the second leading cause of death among 15-29 year-olds globally, and over 79% of suicides occur in low and middle income countries.

"We should all strive for a world where people are not judged by their mental health. The decriminalisation of attempted suicide is the first step in ensuring the rights of vulnerable individuals are upheld", said Rory O'Connor, IASP President. "In urging countries to reform their laws and end the criminalisation of suicide, we can make progress towards reducing stigma and encouraging understanding and work towards positively influencing mental health policy; a vital step in ensuring those engaging in suicidal behaviour obtain the help they need and want. "

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To access the report: unitedgmh.org/suicide-decriminalisation

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Note to Editors

- The countries where suicide is a criminal offence are Bahamas, Bangladesh, Brunei, Ghana, Guyana, Kenya, Malawi, Malaysia, Myanmar, Nigeria, Pakistan, Papua New Guinea, Qatar, Saint Lucia, Somalia, South Sudan, Sudan, Tanzania, Tonga and Uganda.
- United for Global Mental Health is an organisation working to amplify the voices of people affected by mental health conditions, increase financing and ensure quality mental health support is accessible to everyone, everywhere, worldwide. For more information on UnitedGMH visit unitedgmh.org
- This report is part of a global effort to end suicide criminalisation. The Global Mental Health Action Network (GMHAN) has established a working group open to anyone interested in tackling this issue. See here for more information about the GMHAN and its work including the range of working groups on different issues relevant to mental health: unitedgmh.org/global-mental-health-action-network
- World Suicide Prevention Day is September 10th, 2021. To learn more visit the website of the International Association for Suicide Prevention at www.iasp.info/wspd2021