

## **Research: “Integration of Mental Health and Psychosocial Support in Primary Health Care for Children, Adolescents, Pregnant Women and New Mothers in the Middle East and North Africa Region”:**

### **A case study - The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the State of Kuwait**

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Globally, one of the most overlooked health concerns involves the mental health and psychosocial well-being of children and adolescents (ages 0–18 years). Before the onset of COVID-19, the World Health Organization reported that 10–20 per cent of children and adolescents worldwide experience poor mental health, and half of all mental disorders have their onset before the age of 14 years. It is estimated that 1 in 6 adolescents between the age of 10–19 years experiences a mental health disorder, and suicide stands as a leading cause of death for individuals aged 15–19 year in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region.

Poor mental health profoundly affects the health, learning and social well-being of children and adolescents, limiting their potential. Childhood and adolescence are crucial developmental stages that shape social, emotional and cognitive skills, laying the foundation for lifelong mental well-being. Mental disorders emerging during this period often persist into adulthood, posing a risk to future mental health. With a view to further diagnose the prevailing mental health situation, a multi-country research initiative titled *“Integration of Mental Health and Psychosocial Support in Primary Health Care for Children, Adolescents, Pregnant Women and New Mothers in the Middle East and North Africa Region”* was launched. The six-country regional implementation research was jointly led by UNICEF MENARO, UNICEF GAO, the Burnet Institute, Australia, and WHO EMRO. The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) and Kuwait, two Gulf countries participated in the research.

The overall **objective** of the project was to understand how MHPSS for children, adolescents and mothers can be effectively integrated and delivered through PHC in MENA. Specifically, the study will contribute to (i) a deeper understanding of the MHPSS needs of children, adolescents, pregnant women/new mothers; (ii) the available services and coverage; and (iii) critical gaps across the promotion, prevention, and the care and treatment interventions within the PHC and its linkages to social welfare, child protection and the education sectors. The country-level case studies were preceded by a regional analysis, a synthesis of available national-level and comparable data to describe the mental health needs (outcomes and risks) of children and adolescents aged 0–18 years, pregnant women and new mothers in the 20 countries<sup>1</sup> of the MENA region. The **research methodology** was a mixed approach, a combination of desk-based review of existing national policies, plans and legislation and key informant interviews with stakeholders. A consultative workshop was conducted in KSA and Kuwait to present the key findings of the desk review and to co-develop strategic recommendations and follow up actions.

**Key findings** underscores that (i) all categories of the populations (children, youth, adults, and elderly) are at higher risk of mental health disorders, given that the majority of the people are dealing with a high prevalence of stressors. Notably, the most imperative needs among children were behavioural and social difficulties, as well as learning and intellectual disorders. Bullying and depression were found as high-priority areas of need for support for children and adolescents, followed by other areas such as substance abuse, attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), and domestic violence. There is a significant lack of MHPSS care provided to children, adolescents, pregnant women and new mothers within the PHC service delivery sector especially in Kuwait. Workforce challenges in the mental health system, including shortages, lack of diversity, high turnover rates and burnout, significantly impact service quality and accessibility. Also, governance and coordination challenges in the mental health system revolve around the lack of a shared vision among different sectors, impacting the effectiveness of outcomes.

The study highlighted prevailing **challenges and proffer recommendations** across core strategic and operational levers, for strengthening MHPSS in PHC. Amongst the levers include - Political commitment and leadership, Governance and policy frameworks, Funding and resource allocation, Engagement with communities and other stakeholders, PHC workforce, Physical infrastructure, Medicines and other health products and Engagement with the private sector.

The study has contributed to a deeper understanding of the MHPSS needs, the available services and critical gaps across the promotion, prevention, and the care and treatment within the primary health care in both KSA and Kuwait. Improving coordination, standardized referral procedures and feedback mechanisms between stakeholders will enhance accountability, learning and the overall effectiveness of mental health services and systems. Furthermore, the knowledge generated, and the specific **lessons learned** that it identifies, will inform evidence-based decision-making, evidence-based advocacy, contributing to learning within UNICEF to strengthen to child well-being in the region and beyond.

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<sup>1</sup> Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Algeria, Djibouti, Egypt, Iran, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, Sudan, Tunisia, Iraq, Libya, Palestine, Syria, Yemen.