

COMMENTARY

Pope Leo XIV caresses a child as he leaves after presiding over a Mass in St Peter's Square at the Vatican. VIA AP



From all accounts, Mariah was a warrior. She fought because she believed that good would conquer evil. We want justice for Mariah, not revenge.

— Senator David Nakhd



World Mental Health Day 2025

Ending discrimination against people with disabilities in mental health

ON THE occasion of World Mental Health Day, observed annually on October 10, the Equal Opportunity Commission (EOC) of TT joins the global community in advocating for inclusive, equitable, and rights-based approaches to mental health.

People with disabilities, whether physical, sensory, intellectual, neurological, developmental or psychosocial are among the most marginalised populations in society and continue to face systemic and widespread discrimination.

Many are at higher risk of experiencing mental health conditions such as depression, anxiety, and paranoia due to a range of social factors including exclusion, stigma, poverty, violence, and lack of access to services.

Conversely, individuals with long-term mental health conditions may themselves be classified as having a disability and are too often subjected to unequal treatment in everyday life.

The Equal Opportunity Act, Chapter 22:03, prohibits discrimination against individuals in employment, education, provision of goods and services, and accommodation, on the ground of disability. However, complaints received by the commission and consultations with stakeholders reveal that people with disabilities continue to face significant barriers to accessing reasonable accommodation, and experience discriminatory practices within employment and education systems.

In terms of employment, reason-



able accommodation can be a change to a job or the work environment to give an individual with a disability an equal opportunity to either apply for a job or perform their job and enjoy equal benefits of employment, without causing the employer an undue administrative burden or disproportionate cost.

Common accommodations include modifying work schedules, providing adaptive technology or equipment like noise cancelling headphones in a loud/disruptive work environment, restructuring job duties, or making the workplace physically accessible.

Discrimination against people with disabilities linked to mental health is compounded by double stigma, one associated with having a disability, and another associated with experiencing mental health issues. This dual stigma marginalises people further, amplifying their risk of social exclusion, discrimination, even abuse, and makes them less likely to seek help due to fear of judgement, mistreatment, or loss of agency.

For example, a young person with autism facing depression may be told their emotional distress is simply "part of their condition" and not taken seriously. A person with schizophrenia may be criminalised or in-

stitutionalised rather than offered community-based support. This reduces trust in systems, isolates individuals, and prevents early intervention, deepening mental health crises.

Women with disabilities face intersectional discrimination, experiencing higher rates of gender-based violence, poverty, and healthcare neglect, all of which exacerbate mental health conditions. People from racial, ethnic, and other minority backgrounds with disabilities also face layered socio-economic barriers.

Legislative and policy reform: a rights-based approach

On June 15, 2015, TT ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCPRD), an international treaty which aims to protect the human rights and dignity of people with disabilities. One of the most effective ways to address discrimination is through policy and legal reform rooted in human rights principles which embodies the needs and opinions of people with disabilities.

The existing frameworks in private sector and state organisations should be reviewed to ensure that no individual is deprived of suitable opportunities in employment, access to education, access to services, or the right to make decisions solely based on a mental health diagnosis or disability status.

Reforms should guarantee the ease with which children with disabilities are able to access education at all

levels by guiding national education policy, implementing teaching aids, technology, hiring adequate specially trained teachers and support personnel to optimise each child's learning experience. Healthcare, public and customer service professionals should be trained in anti-discrimination practices and disability inclusion or receive ongoing education on how to deliver services that respect the dignity and autonomy of all individuals.

Moreover, mental health should be integrated into broader disability inclusion strategies in housing and accommodation through planning approvals, social protection, general access in public recreational facilities, public institutions, client service spaces, public transportation, and disaster response.

Towards an inclusive, equitable community

Changing public perception toward mental health requires both national commitment and individual responsibility.

At the national level, sustained public education campaigns, inclusive policies and visible support and leadership from government and civil society are essential to challenge deep-rooted stigma and misinformation surrounding mental health. By integrating mental health education into schools, workplaces, and community programmes, we can normalise conversations around emotional well-being and promote a culture of empathy, understanding and support.

At the individual level, each citizen of TT has a role to play, by learning about mental health and its associated disabilities, confronting their personal biases and fostering open, non-judgemental dialogue with others. Collectively, these efforts can shift mental health from a taboo topic, a source of comedy and ridicule to a shared priority, one that is treated with the same importance and dignity as physical health. Mental health must be understood, not only as a medical issue, but as a social justice issue, intrinsically connected to rights, equity, and inclusion.

A call to action

World Mental Health Day offers an opportunity not only to raise awareness, but to drive transformational change toward equity and inclusion for people with disabilities. Our national motto, "Together we aspire, together we achieve," is a reminder to reaffirm our national commitment to building an inclusive society, free from discrimination, where every individual regardless of disability or mental health status is treated with respect, compassion, dignity and has equal access to opportunities.

This article is intended for educational and informational purposes only and does not constitute legal advice. For further information or concerns regarding discrimination, readers are encouraged to contact the Equal Opportunity Commission at 1-868-672-0928, e-mail us at communications@eoc.gov.tt or visit our website at www.equalopportunity.gov.tt