**Background**

The Government of Kazakhstan has made adolescent mental health and suicide prevention a national priority. it has increased financing for mental health services by 25 percent. Research shows that social isolation, loss of predictable routine and uncertainty about the future brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic negatively affected mental health of youth, especially children and adolescents. Before the pandemic, compared to other developing and developed nations, Kazakhstan had a higher suicide rate among children aged 5-14 and young people aged 15-24.

A more holistic understanding of mental well-being entails the mental health continuum, which is a proactive approach that recognizes that mental health as a spectrum ranging from thriving and optimal well-being to experiencing mental health challenges and illnesses. It emphasizes that mental health is not a static state but rather a dynamic and evolving aspect of human experience. It encourages early intervention, prevention, and the promotion of positive mental health practices. It also helps reduce stigma and promotes open discussions about mental health, enabling individuals to seek help and support at any point on the continuum. Recognizing the mental health continuum promotes a comprehensive and inclusive approach to mental health care, fostering resilience, and improving overall quality of life.

Despite integration of mental health services into Primary Health Care (PHC) in Kazakhstan, professional mental health standards have only been implemented at the level of specialized care. Hence the mental health continuum model has not been sustained. Incorporating mental health standards in PHC facilities is important for several reasons. PHC facilities serve as the first point of contact for individuals seeking healthcare services. Incorporating mental health standards at this level promotes early detection and intervention reducing the burden on specialized mental health services and facilitating timely access to care and/or referral to other services including psychosocial support. It also helps to reduce stigma, promotes a holistic approach to healthcare and encourages healthcare providers to consider mental health in their assessments, diagnoses, and treatment plans. Integrating mental health standards in PHC facilities aligns with the principles of community-based care and decentralization of healthcare services making mental healthcare more accessible and reducing barriers to treatment.

In the time of growth into adulthood, adolescents are developing a unique personality and looking for more independence and responsibility. They increasingly interact with others through social media and mobile phones. As a result, they may spend less time with family and more time with friends, both online and outside the home. This is also a time of physical changes for both girls and boys. Poor mental health in adolescence can go hand-in-hand with other health and behavioural risks, including alcohol or drug use, violent behaviour and unsafe sex. A recent study made by UNICEF on child online safety in Kazakhstan informs on the knowledge and practices of children and adolescents with internet, and the risks they are facing online. It shows that only a minority of children and adolescents who witnessed or experienced cyberbullying or other disturbing experience online talked to someone or sought for help. Because many health behaviours and habits carry over from adolescence into adult years, it is very important to support adolescents in choosing healthy practices that assist their well-being.

Children living with HIV (LWHIV) and other chronic disease are particularly vulnerable to mental health challenges. High levels of self- and external stigma among children and adolescents living with HIV impacts mental health and continues to be a considerable barrier to disclosure, with 57 per cent of respondents keeping their own status secret and 61 per cent of respondents reporting that they would be careful not to disclose their results to anyone. Furthermore, 23 per cent of respondents experiencing stigma reported being hurt by others’ reactions to learning of their HIV status.

Youth Health Centers (YHCs) play a crucial role in addressing the healthcare needs of adolescents and young people. YHCs provide integrated package of services covering sexual and reproductive health, mental health, nutrition, chronic diseases management, vaccination, risky behavior, bullying and learning problems, violence, parent-adolescent communication etc. Thanks to innovative model of integrated online services in YHCs designed with UNICEF’s support, today adolescents enjoy increased access to quality information, health and social services for maintaining wellbeing and successful transition into adulthood. However, this model requires further sustaining and scaling up in all regions of the country.

There are 141 YCHs in Kazakhstan. YHCs are a component of primary healthcare. All YHCs have psychologists in the team who offer MHPSS services. However, because there are no standards for this type of care, it is hard to establish what services (to what amount) and in what situations should be offered; harmonize and monitor the quality of these services, including through training; and pay for these services. Another challenge is limited accessibility of YHCs, especially in rural areas. Many young people living in remote regions face difficulties in accessing services due to long distances, inadequate transportation, and a lack of awareness about available resources. This inequality in access to healthcare can negatively impact the well-being of young people and hinder their ability to make informed decisions about their health. There is also a need to enhance the quality and scope of services provided by YHCs. There is room for improvement in terms of the range of services offered and the expertise of healthcare professionals, especially when it comes to MHPSS. Expanding the scope of services to include MHPSS services, would better cater to the holistic needs of adolescents and young people. To accelerate progress in MHPSS with adolescents and young people, more effective policies are needed, alongside the development and introduction of innovative technologies in the service delivery system. Sustainable programmes aimed at mental health and psychosocial support for adolescents and young people are required considering the achievement of the “last mile” (well-being for the most vulnerable and marginalized) as a priority. A significant objective is to ensure fair costs for MHPSS services, as well as to strengthen the YHC's ability for activity planning, monitoring, and evaluation. This would help to retain YHC professionals who provide MHPSS services by ensuring competitive compensation, as well as provide YHC with resources that can be used to improve MHPSS capacity.

The Government has recently intensified efforts in strengthening children and adolescents’ access to MHPSS services, especially for the most vulnerable, through the reform and expansion of the Family Support Centers under the Ministry of Culture and Information and the Pedagogical and Psychological Centers under the Ministry of Education. This is a key momentum to accompany national efforts and optimize approaches across different sectors for improving children and adolescents' access to quality MHPSS.