

# Mentally ill in Nigeria: The Planet's Most Unlucky?

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It is like a scene straight out of a 'nature gone mad' horror film. George Romero's classic "Night of the Living Dead" comes to mind.

The dinner bell rings. A response is triggered. One by one, the female residents of Rosalie Home trickle out of their sleeping quarters and into the hallway. In zombie-like slow motion — stiff, sluggish, and deliberate — they move together in a gathering herd. No eyes blinking. No heads turning. No excitement. No emotion. The bodies are present, but their minds are elsewhere. Could these women have once been functioning members of society?

They trickle into the common area of this rehabilitation center for mentally ill women in Port Harcourt, Nigeria and fill the couches along the walls. Not an empty seat to be found, as usual, yet deathly quiet, except for a nurse in the corner rustling with her checklist and the box of psychiatric drugs at her feet. The routine is the same. Medications first, then dinner.

The nurse begins the roll call.

"Patience," she says, no hint of irony in her voice. No response.

Again, louder, "Patience!"

This time, it registers.

Patience slogs her way the nurse's station, collects her pills and lifts them into her mouth. On her tongue they sit, they wait and they melt...until she can hoist her plastic cup of water ever so mechanically to her lips and, with an assist from gravity, flush them down. Check marked, the nurse calls out the next name.

It seems unconscionable to think that Patience and the 77 other women cared for by the Daughters of Charity in Rosalie Home and three other such centers in southern Nigeria are in any way lucky or fortunate. To start, they live in one of the most densely populated, god-forsaken countries on the globe, where corruption, disease, and poverty are the rule, not the exception. For most Nigerians, life is nearly intolerable, a desperate struggle for survival that consumes all available energy. And for these residents, the problems are even more intense. Family rejection, homelessness, addiction, illness and abuse have catapulted them well beyond the brink of sanity. Their minds have snapped and may not have the elasticity to bounce back.





But, unlike others in their predicament who fall through the gaping cracks of Nigerian society, these women at least have a safety net thanks to a few caring Sisters.

“We get them in the marketplace. We get them stark naked in the road dancing. Some we get in traffic jams,” says Sister Stella Julie Obi, DC, who runs the Providence Home for Destitute Women in Uyo. “But we take them off the streets and bring them back home (where) they are fed, loved, and sheltered.” And with that, they have a fighting chance.

Which is not to say the women come willingly. They have a lot of fight in them, too.

“When we bring them in, they have been on the road for a very long time. (They are) very dirty and smelly, with dreadlocks. Horrible looking really. Very tiny and disfigured,” explains Sister Perpetua Okoli, DC, director of the St. Vincent de Paul Center for Women in Need in Iwaro Oka. “One nearly killed me. I had to run.”

“Some of them are violent. To catch them is not easy. They are trying to defend themselves, too,” adds Sister Stella. “Somebody you don’t know coming to take you? It’s a kind of defense mechanism. But when they find out we’re not harmful, that we’re friends, they cooperate.”

The Sisters’ goal is to rehabilitate these women, make them self-reliant and reintegrate them into society. But, as they regret to admit, the road to recovery is more like a long, dark tunnel with only a blessed few finding light at the end.

Restoring self-esteem and dignity, the Sisters’ keys to success, begins with washing, cleaning, and clothing each new arrival. A psychiatric doctor makes an assessment, and treatment begins. Then, they establish a daily routine from wake up to lights out, and all the meals in between.

“Some don’t like to eat because they like to pick things from the ground. That’s what they’re used to,” explains Sister Perpetua. “We try to get them back to a normal way of life — to eat from plates, to eat at a table,” and, eventually, back to their family.

“Some people here in the rural area, if they have relatives with mental illness, they feel it’s a curse. Witchcraft,” says Sister Perpetua, describing the challenge of reconciliation. “They don’t know

what really causes it, so they feel it’s a curse placed on their families, and they reject them. What’s worse than your family rejecting you?”

Sister Perpetua continues, “It’s very, very painful. It even causes relapse.”

Back at Rosalie Home, supper is ending just as the dreaded ‘R’ word rears its unwanted, ugly head once again. Relapse. The Sister in charge has just received word that a former resident, rehabilitated long ago, has been ‘picked’ off the streets and will arrive at the compound any minute. The staff scurries around preparing tranquilizer syringes and readying a bed in the already teeming facility.

A quick honk of the horn opens Rosalie Home’s front gate and a rickety sedan pulls in. Four Good Samaritans burst out of the car; blood-curdling screams bellow from the bottomless pit of the back seat. They motion for help, take a deep breath and delve back in. Bystanders wait anxiously to see what beholds them. An unruly whirl of limbs, dreadlocks, and screeches emerges. A snarled mess, the young woman is rail-thin, loosely clothed, cross-eyed, and blisteringly angry — the agony of relapse on parade.

The Rosalie Home staff knows the drill. Control her, sedate her, and, like Sisyphus staring at his rock at the base of the mountain, restart the long hard push forward one more time.

“Mental illness is not totally curable. It can just be put under control,” concedes Sister Perpetua. “We shouldn’t let it pain us so much because we know it’s a lifelong illness. The person has to live with it.

“We put in so much effort — our time, our money, our energy, all the resources we have — that when the relapse cases come, (we see) all our efforts are wasted. It’s really painful and discouraging. We weep a lot. But that’s just to console us. We know we shouldn’t let it bother us so much. We should just continue to try.”

And with that, the Sisters have made their stand and accepted the reality that, similar to “Night of the Living Dead,” a happy ending has not been scripted. But as long as Patience and her fellow residents are searching for light in the pitch darkness, the Sisters will keep their torch burning. ■

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