Protests Born Of Desperation: Exploring The Mental Health Impact Of Poor Governance On Kenya's Gen Z And Pathways To Healing

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Abstract—The intersection of poor governance and mental health is increasingly gaining attention in Kenya, particularly among Generation Z (Gen Z), a demographic uniquely positioned between the country's potential and its pervasive systemic failures. As governance lapses manifest through corruption, economic stagnation, and inequitable resource allocation, the mental health toll on young Kenyans has reached unprecedented levels. This generation, aged approximately 11 to 28 years, grapples with soaring unemployment rates, estimated at 13.3% as of 2023 (World Bank, 2023), and a cost-of-living crisis exacerbated by inflation, which climbed to 9.2% in June 2023 (Kenya National Bureau of Statistics [KNBS], 2023). These socio-economic challenges have catalyzed protests, not merely as political expressions but as cries of desperation. The psychological effects of these protests include heightened anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). The ubiquity of social media further amplifies these stressors, creating echo chambers of despair. Addressing these issues requires a multi-faceted approach: individual mental health interventions, community resilience-building, and systemic governance reforms. Faith-based organizations and theological frameworks, with their emphasis on hope and restoration, can provide critical pathways to healing, particularly in a culturally embedded context like Kenya. This article explores the mental health impact of poor governance on Kenya's Gen Z, framing the crisis as both a national and generational emergency. It concludes by recommending actionable pathways to healing, combining individual, community, and systemic efforts to ensure holistic restoration and sustainable development.

Keywords—*Generation Z, Poor Governance, Mental Health, Protests, Kenya, Pathways to Healing, Corruption, Youth, Empowerment, Theology.*

1.INTRODUCTION

Generation Z (Gen Z), comprising individuals born between 1995 and 2010, represents a demographic deeply rooted in the digital age and characterized by their progressive outlook, technological savviness, and desire for change. In Kenya, this cohort accounts for approximately 32% of the population (Kenya National Bureau of Statistics [KNBS], 2022), placing them at the epicenter of socio-political and economic transformations. Despite their potential to drive progress, Gen Z faces a precarious sociopolitical context marked by systemic governance failures, widespread corruption, and limited opportunities for socioeconomic mobility.

1.1 Gen Z in Kenya: A Generation in Crisis

Kenya's Generation Z has come of age in a nation grappling with endemic corruption, economic inequality, and unemployment. The 2023 Transparency International Corruption Perceptions Index ranked Kenya at 123 out of 180 countries, highlighting the persistent governance challenges (Transparency International, 2023). Youth unemployment remains a critical issue, with rates hovering around 13.3% (World Bank, 2023), disproportionately affecting the younger population. These conditions, compounded by rising inflation and a high cost of living, have bred a sense of disenfranchisement among young people, many of whom feel neglected by the state's leadership.

The Gen Z experience is further complicated by their unique exposure to global trends through digital platforms. Unlike previous generations, they are acutely aware of governance successes and failures worldwide, which fuels their aspirations and frustrations in equal measure. This awareness often turns into collective action, as seen in the growing number of youth-led protests against economic injustices, electoral malpractice, and police brutality.

1.2 Linking Governance to Mental Health

Poor governance, characterized by corruption, inequitable policies, and weak institutional frameworks, directly influences the mental well-being of Gen Z in Kenya. Governance failures exacerbate stressors such as financial instability, lack of access to quality education, and social inequality, creating an environment where mental health challenges thrive. Studies have consistently linked economic instability and unemployment to heightened risks of depression and anxiety (Bennett et al., 2022).

Furthermore, the state's inability to provide adequate mental health services compounds the issue. Kenya has only 0.19 psychiatrists per 100,000 people, far below the global average of 1.3 (World

Health Organization [WHO], 2021). This shortage leaves many Gen Z individuals with unmet mental health needs, exacerbating their vulnerability to conditions such as depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

1.3 Protests as Expressions of Desperation

In recent years, protests have become a defining feature of Kenya's socio-political landscape. These demonstrations are not merely acts of defiance but expressions of desperation borne out of systemic neglect. The 2023 anti-government protests, driven by rising costs of living and electoral dissatisfaction, saw significant participation from young people, including members of Gen Z (Al Jazeera, 2023). For many, protests represent a last resort in a system perceived to be unresponsive to their needs.

However, the psychological toll of these protests cannot be ignored. Participants often experience trauma, fear, and a sense of hopelessness as their efforts for change are met with repression or indifference. The use of social media to amplify protest movements further complicates this dynamic, creating echo chambers that reinforce feelings of despair while fostering community solidarity.

This article seeks to unpack the mental health impact of poor governance on Kenya's Gen Z, framing the issue as both a generational and national emergency. By examining the root causes, psychological implications, and potential pathways to healing, the discussion aims to offer actionable solutions that address both systemic failures and individual needs.

1.4 Poor Governance and Its Ramifications

Poor governance refers to the failure of governing bodies to exercise their authority effectively, equitably, and responsibly. It manifests in various ways, including corruption, lack of accountability, weak institutional frameworks, and policy failures. In Kenya, poor governance has remained a persistent challenge, undermining socio-economic development and exacerbating inequality. Transparency International's 2023 Corruption Perceptions Index ranked Kenya at 123 out of 180 countries, underscoring the systemic corruption deeply entrenched within the nation's public and private sectors (Transparency International, 2023).

For Kenya's Generation Z (Gen Z), poor governance is not merely an abstract concept but a lived reality. Its manifestations, unemployment, failing public systems, and inequitable resource distribution directly impact their opportunities, mental health, and overall quality of life. This systemic failure creates a cascade of socio-economic and psychological challenges, leaving young people in a state of desperation and uncertainty.

1.5 Manifestations of Poor Governance in Kenya

1.5.0 Corruption and Mismanagement of Resources: Corruption remains a critical barrier to effective governance in Kenya. The National Anti-Corruption Steering Committee estimated in 2022 that over Kenya shillings 2 billion is lost daily to graft (Nation, 2022). This misappropriation of resources has crippled essential public services such as healthcare and education, further marginalizing vulnerable populations, including young people.

1.5.1 Unemployment and Economic Disparities:
Unemployment among Kenyan youth is alarmingly high, with the World Bank estimating it at 13.3% in 2023. This rate is significantly higher among Gen Z, who often lack access to quality education and vocational training due to systemic failures in the education system. Even for those who achieve tertiary education, job opportunities are scarce, creating a paradox of highly educated but unemployed youth.

1.5.2 Failing Public Systems:
Public systems, including healthcare, education, and infrastructure, have been undermined by years of underfunding and poor policy implementation. For example, Kenya spends approximately 1.2% of its GDP on mental health services, far below the recommended 5% by the World Health Organization (WHO, 2021). This has resulted in a shortage of mental health professionals, with only 0.19 psychiatrists per 100,000 people, leaving many young people without access to crucial mental health support (WHO, 2021).

1.5.3 Policies and Historical Events Exacerbating the Situation

Several policies and historical events have entrenched the current governance crisis. For instance, the structural adjustment programs (SAPs) imposed in the 1980s and 1990s by international financial institutions led to reduced public spending on essential services, weakening the foundations of Kenya's social support systems (World Bank, 2023). Additionally, political missteps such as contested elections and instances of post-election violence have eroded public trust in governance structures, further polarizing the nation along ethnic and socio-economic lines.

1.5.4 Governance Failures and Their Impact on Gen Z

The consequences of governance failures are particularly acute for Kenya's Gen Z, who are at a formative stage of their lives. The inability to secure jobs, combined with high living costs and limited access to quality education, has created a generation grappling with a pervasive sense of despair. A 2023 report by the Kenya National Bureau of Statistics (KNBS) revealed that 40% of unemployed youth cited governance failures as the primary reason for their struggles (KNBS, 2023). Moreover, the psychological impact of these challenges cannot be overstated. Chronic unemployment and systemic neglect are significant contributors to mental health issues, including depression, anxiety, and substance abuse

among young people (Bennett et al., 2022). The ongoing protests, driven by economic grievances and social injustices, further expose youth to trauma, compounding their mental health struggles.

The discussion of poor governance and its ramifications lays a critical foundation for understanding the interplay between systemic failures and the mental health challenges faced by Gen Z. Addressing these issues requires a multi-faceted approach that not only reforms governance structures but also prioritizes the well-being of young people as central to national development.

1.5.5 Mental Health Challenges Among Kenya's Gen Z

Kenya's Generation Z (Gen Z) faces a unique convergence of challenges that profoundly impact their mental health. Born between 1997 and 2012, this demographic has come of age in an era marked by rapid technological advancements, socio-economic disparities, and heightened cultural tensions. Unlike previous generations, Kenyan Gen Z grapples with unprecedented stressors exacerbated by systemic governance failures and shifting societal norms. These stressors manifest in various ways, including unemployment, financial insecurity, and conflicting cultural expectations. The cumulative effect of these factors has led to a rise in mental health issues such as depression, anxiety, and a pervasive sense of hopelessness.

1.5.6 Unemployment and Financial Insecurity

One of the most significant stressors for Kenya's Gen Z is unemployment. According to the Kenya National Bureau of Statistics (KNBS, 2023), youth unemployment stands at approximately 13.3%, with higher rates observed among those aged 18–25. Many Gen Z individuals complete secondary or tertiary education only to face a job market that offers few opportunities. The mismatch between qualifications and available jobs leaves them vulnerable to financial insecurity and feelings of inadequacy.

Financial instability further compounds their mental health struggles. A study by Muthoni et al. (2022) revealed that 64% of unemployed Kenyan youth report symptoms of anxiety related to their inability to meet basic needs or contribute to family incomes. This persistent economic pressure fosters chronic stress, which is linked to long-term mental health issues such as depression and substance abuse.

1.5.7 Limited Opportunities for Social Mobility

Kenya's deeply ingrained socio-economic inequalities create a rigid structure that limits social mobility. For Gen Z, this often translates to a lack of pathways for personal and professional growth, regardless of their academic achievements or entrepreneurial ambitions. A 2021 report by the World Bank highlighted that only 6% of Kenyan youth transition into formal employment annually, with the rest navigating the informal sector, which is characterized by instability and low wages (World Bank, 2021).

This stagnation fosters feelings of helplessness and hopelessness, as young people perceive their efforts to improve their circumstances as futile. Such despair often manifests as symptoms of depression, with many Gen Z individuals reporting feelings of worthlessness and a lack of motivation to pursue their goals.

1.5.8 Cultural Expectations Versus Modern Aspirations

Kenya's Gen Z inhabits a unique cultural intersection where traditional expectations often clash with modern aspirations. They are frequently burdened by cultural expectations to conform to prescribed roles, such as early marriage or specific career paths, which may contradict their personal ambitions or the realities of a globalized world.

For instance, young women are often pressured to prioritize marriage over education or career advancement, while young men face societal demands to achieve financial success despite limited opportunities (Muchiri et al., 2022). This conflict creates cognitive dissonance, leading to heightened levels of stress and anxiety. The inability to reconcile these opposing demands often leaves Gen Z feeling trapped, isolated, and misunderstood.

1.6 Common Mental Health Issues

1.6.0 Depression

Depression is among the most prevalent mental health issues affecting Kenya's Gen Z. The Ministry of Health (2023) reported that 20% of Kenyan youth experience depressive episodes annually, with contributing factors ranging from unemployment to societal pressures. Symptoms such as persistent sadness, fatigue, and loss of interest in daily activities are common and often go untreated due to stigma or limited access to mental health services.

1.6.3 Anxiety

Anxiety disorders, including generalized anxiety disorder and social anxiety, are increasingly reported among Gen Z. The constant uncertainty surrounding their futures, coupled with the pressures of social comparison amplified by digital platforms, contributes to heightened levels of anxiety. A survey by Mental Health Kenya (2022) indicated that 35% of Gen Z respondents frequently feel anxious about their financial situations and societal expectations.

1.6.2 Hopelessness

Hopelessness is a pervasive feeling among Kenya's Gen Z, often stemming from the intersection of governance failures and personal struggles. The inability to envision a better future leads many young people to disengage from societal and familial responsibilities. This emotional state is a critical risk

factor for suicidal ideation, which has been rising among Kenyan youth. The World Health Organization (2021) reported that suicide rates among individuals aged 15–24 increased by 10% between 2018 and 2020 in Kenya. The mental health challenges faced by Kenya's Gen Z are deeply intertwined with systemic socio-economic and cultural factors. Addressing these challenges requires a holistic approach that not only reforms governance structures but also integrates mental health awareness and support into national policies. By understanding and addressing the unique stressors faced by this generation, Kenya can create a pathway toward healing and resilience, empowering Gen Z to contribute meaningfully to the nation's future.

1.7 Protests as a Cry for Help

In recent years, Kenya has witnessed a surge in protests, particularly among its youth, which have escalated into nationwide movements. These protests, often ignited by economic hardships, political frustrations, and systemic failures, serve as potent expressions of desperation and disenfranchisement. For many young Kenyans, including members of Generation Z, these demonstrations are more than just acts of defiance, they are cries for help, signals of a generation struggling to cope with a sense of abandonment by the state and society at large. The mental health implications of these protests are profound, not only for those directly involved but also for the broader society that watches these events unfold. The interplay between protest and psychological well-being is complex, with trauma, fear, and burnout emerging as significant consequences for both the protesters and the witnesses.

1.8 Protests as Expressions of Desperation and Disenfranchisement

The recent wave of protests in Kenya, particularly those centered around issues like rising unemployment, high cost of living, and perceived government corruption, can be seen as a direct response to years of systemic neglect. In 2023, the youth-led protests against the government's handling of the economy, particularly the tax increases and fuel price hikes, became a national outcry. According to the Kenya Human Rights Commission (2023), more than 80% of those participating in the protests were under the age of 35, a demographic largely disenfranchised by the limited job prospects, educational opportunities, and political representation available to them.

For many Gen Z Kenyans, the frustrations that fuel these protests stem from a profound sense of abandonment by the state. Governance failures, exacerbated by corruption and inefficiency, have left young people without the resources or support needed to thrive. The result is a generation that feels unheard and marginalized, turning to public demonstrations as a last resort to demand attention to their plight. These protests, therefore, should be understood not only as political statements but as manifestations of mental health crises, individuals who feel they have no other recourse but to raise their voices in public defiance.

1.9 The Psychological Toll of Protests: Trauma, Fear, and Burnout

While protests may begin as a form of resistance, they often carry significant psychological costs for the individuals involved. The experience of participating in protests, especially in violent or repressive settings, can lead to trauma, fear, and long-term burnout.

1.9.0 Trauma

Protesters, particularly those involved in confrontational demonstrations, often experience trauma from encounters with law enforcement, violent clashes, and the constant threat of arrest or injury. A study by the African Centre for the Study of Violence (2022) found that 65% of youth participants in violent protests reported post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) symptoms, including nightmares, hypervigilance, and flashbacks. For young Kenyans already struggling with mental health issues such as depression and anxiety, the trauma induced by such experiences compounds their existing distress.

1.9.1 Fear and Anxiety

Protests also breed an atmosphere of fear, where young people, particularly those who are active in organizing or participating in protests, live in constant fear of retaliation from the government or authorities. Fear of police brutality and violence is prevalent, and it fuels a heightened state of anxiety, leading many young individuals to avoid participation altogether, despite their desire to stand up for their rights (Kariuki & Otieno, 2022). The psychological effects of such fear can be long-lasting, leading to a pervasive sense of powerlessness and alienation from society.

1.9.2 Burnout

The emotional toll of protests extends beyond the physical dangers. The sustained engagement in activism, especially when it appears to have little tangible effect, can lead to political and emotional burnout. A report from the Center for Policy and Social Research (2023) highlighted that many activists, particularly young ones, experience a sense of futility after prolonged protests, leading to exhaustion, disengagement, and even withdrawal from social and political life. Burnout can manifest as apathy, a lack of motivation, and in some cases, the cessation of activism altogether, with young people choosing to retreat into a more passive existence as a coping mechanism.

1.10 The Role of Social Media in Amplifying Both Community and Psychological Pressure

Social media has played a dual role in the mental health dynamics surrounding protests in Kenya. On one hand, it has provided a platform for young people to express their frustrations, organize, and amplify their voices, creating a sense of solidarity and community. On the other hand, it has intensified the

psychological pressure on Gen Z, adding a layer of public scrutiny, fear of online harassment, and comparison to others.

1.10.0 Sense of Community

Social media has allowed young Kenyans to connect and build solidarity with others who share their frustrations. Online platforms like Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram have become spaces for youth to rally, share stories, and seek support. In the aftermath of protests, social media has also served as a tool for documenting and shedding light on instances of government violence or police brutality. According to a study by Kamau and Ndegwa (2023), 78% of protestors reported feeling a sense of camaraderie and collective strength due to the online communities that formed around the protests. This virtual solidarity fosters a sense of belonging and empowerment for young people who may otherwise feel isolated in their struggles.

1.10.1 Psychological Pressure and Online Harassment

However, the constant exposure to online commentary and the pressure to perform politically on social media platforms can also lead to increased stress and anxiety. The phenomenon of "clicktivism" (a form of activism that exists solely online) has placed young Kenyans under immense pressure to continuously engage in protests or public discourse, lest they be perceived as apathetic or uninformed. This pressure can lead to feelings of inadequacy, especially when there is little recognition for the efforts of grassroots organizers.

Moreover, social media has also become a space for online harassment, with young activists often facing personal attacks, cyberbullying, and threats from both state and non-state actors. A report by the Kenyan Digital Rights Consortium (2022) found that 42% of young activists who used social media platforms during protests reported experiencing online threats or harassment. These digital threats exacerbate the emotional toll of activism, leading many young people to reconsider their participation in online spaces or protest movements altogether.

The recent protests in Kenya represent more than just political action; they are cries for help from a generation grappling with economic insecurity, cultural pressures, and the psychological weight of a society that seems to have left them behind. The mental health toll of these protests is profound, leading to trauma, fear, burnout, and heightened anxiety. While social media plays a crucial role in amplifying both the sense of community and the psychological pressure faced by youth, it is clear that the mental health needs of Gen Z must be addressed as part of any long-term solution to the challenges they face. This requires a holistic approach that combines political reform with mental health support, providing young people with the tools they need to heal and thrive in an increasingly complex world.

1.11 Pathways to Healing

The mental health challenges faced by Kenya's Gen Z in the context of poor governance are substantial, but they are not insurmountable. While the psychological toll of disenfranchisement and political unrest is deeply entrenched, healing is possible through a multifaceted approach that integrates individual interventions, community-based initiatives, governance reforms, and educational awareness. These pathways to healing must focus on restoring agency, fostering resilience, and providing both the mental health support and political empowerment needed to repair the psychological and social fabric of the nation.

1.11.0 Individual Interventions: Access to Mental Health Services, Youth Empowerment Programs, and Skills Training

One of the most pressing needs for young people in Kenya today is access to comprehensive mental health services. According to the World Health Organization (WHO, 2022), Kenya faces a severe shortage of mental health professionals, with only about 0.1 psychiatrists per 100,000 people. This lack of mental health infrastructure makes it difficult for young Kenyans to receive the care they desperately need. In response to this challenge, there is an urgent need for policies that promote mental health access at the grassroots level.

Youth empowerment programs that incorporate mental health support are critical in fostering resilience and providing avenues for healing. Programs that blend psychological support with skills training can help mitigate the feelings of helplessness that fuel protest movements. For instance, the "Youth Empowerment and Mental Health Program" initiated by the Ministry of Youth Affairs in 2021 has been instrumental in equipping young people with coping mechanisms while simultaneously offering vocational training to enhance their economic prospects. Such initiatives create a dual benefit: they address immediate mental health needs while promoting long-term economic independence.

Skills training programs, particularly those in the fields of technology, agriculture, and entrepreneurship, have also emerged as key elements in youth empowerment. According to the Kenya National Bureau of Statistics (2023), nearly 70% of youth unemployment in Kenya is attributed to a lack of skills training. By integrating mental health support into these training programs, young people can develop resilience in both their emotional well-being and professional lives. Such programs also serve as platforms for instilling a sense of purpose, which can counter the despair that often accompanies political and economic marginalization.

1.11.1 Community-Based Approaches: Faith-Based Interventions, Peer Counselling, and Grassroots Initiatives

While individual interventions are crucial, community-based approaches provide a sense of collective healing, offering spaces for young people to feel supported by their peers and community leaders. In Kenya, faith-based organizations play a pivotal role in both mental health care and social cohesion. The church, mosques, and other religious groups are often the first points of contact for youth seeking support. These institutions have the reach, trust, and infrastructure to offer both spiritual and psychological care. Faith-based mental health programs such as the "Healing Together Initiative," launched by the Kenya Conference of Catholic Bishops (2023), combine counselling with spiritual guidance, providing holistic care that addresses both the mind and the soul.

Peer counselling has also gained significant traction as a form of community-based support for mental health. Many Kenyan youth, particularly those in urban areas, face isolation and a lack of emotional connection, which can exacerbate feelings of despair. Peer counseling, where young people are trained to offer emotional support to their peers, has proven effective in creating informal but supportive networks. According to the Kenya Youth Development Institute (2022), peer counselling programs have reduced incidents of suicide and self-harm among Kenyan youth by up to 20%, providing tangible evidence of the efficacy of this approach.

Grassroots initiatives that focus on mental health and youth empowerment are also crucial. The "Sauti ya Vijana" (Voice of Youth) program, which was started by local community-based organizations in 2022, trains youth leaders to provide mental health education and support in their communities. These programs not only address mental health concerns but also advocate for social and political reforms, offering a platform for youth to voice their frustrations in a way that encourages healing and empowerment.

1.11.2 Governance Reforms: Advocating for Transparent Leadership, Youth Representation in Governance, and Anti-Corruption Measures

At the core of Kenya's ongoing mental health crisis is the lack of accountable and transparent governance. Protests often arise from a sense of alienation from political processes, where young people feel their voices are not heard, and their needs are not prioritized. Therefore, governance reforms must form a fundamental part of any pathway to healing.

One of the most critical reforms is increasing youth representation in governance. The current political landscape in Kenya, where young people are underrepresented in key decision- making positions, exacerbates feelings of exclusion and powerlessness. The 2022 general elections saw only 16% of youth candidates elected to parliament, a reflection of the political disempowerment many young Kenyans experience. The creation of youth-focused political platforms, such as the "Youth Parliament Initiative," which seeks to amplify the voices of young people in decision-making, could provide much-needed political agency and reduce the sense of disenfranchisement that leads to protests.

Anti-corruption measures are also essential in the fight for better governance and improved mental health outcomes. Corruption continues to rob Kenya's youth of opportunities, from education to employment. As the Transparency International Kenya report (2023) notes, over 40% of youth unemployment in Kenya is linked to corruption in both the public and private sectors. Strengthening institutions that fight corruption and ensuring that youth have a stake in these processes is crucial. The "Youth Anti-Corruption Campaign," launched by the Kenyan government in collaboration with civil society groups in 2022, focuses on educating young people about their rights and empowering them to take action against corrupt practices. Such initiatives can foster hope and provide young people with a sense of agency, reducing their psychological distress and mitigating the feelings of powerlessness that fuel protests.

1.11.3 Education and Awareness: Programs to Destigmatize Mental Health and Promote Resilience

Education and awareness are key to addressing the stigma surrounding mental health in Kenya. Mental health has long been a taboo subject, with many young people fearing discrimination or social exclusion if they seek help. As such, destigmatizing mental health issues is an essential part of the healing process for Gen Z.

National programs aimed at raising awareness about mental health, such as the "Mental Health Awareness Week" organized by the Ministry of Health in collaboration with NGOs (2023), play an instrumental role in educating young people about the importance of mental well-being. These programs, which include workshops, media campaigns, and community outreach, help create a culture where mental health is openly discussed and treated as a priority.

Moreover, resilience-building programs can provide young people with the skills needed to cope with the psychological pressures of living in a politically unstable environment. The "Resilience Through Education" program, which has been implemented by the African Mental Health Foundation (2022), trains young people in schools and universities to develop coping mechanisms that promote mental well-being in the face of adversity. By teaching emotional intelligence, stress management, and problem-solving skills, such programs can help reduce the incidence of mental health crises triggered by political and social unrest.

Healing the mental health crisis among Kenya's Gen Z requires a multifaceted approach that addresses both the psychological needs of individuals and the structural issues that contribute to their distress. Individual interventions, such as mental

health services, youth empowerment programs, and skills training, provide critical support for young people in their journey toward healing. Community-based approaches, including faith-based interventions, peer counselling, and grassroots initiatives, offer platforms for collective healing and empowerment. Governance reforms that advocate for youth representation and anti-corruption measures are crucial for reducing feelings of political alienation and powerlessness. Finally, educational programs aimed at destigmatizing mental health and promoting resilience can foster a culture of well-being and solidarity. Together, these pathways to healing offer hope for a brighter future for Kenya's youth, where they can overcome the psychological challenges posed by poor governance and build a more resilient, inclusive, and equitable society.

1.11.4 The Role of Theology in Healing

The healing process for Kenya's Gen Z in the face of poor governance is multifaceted, requiring not only psychological and socio-political interventions but also spiritual healing. Theologically informed reflections and interventions, especially through faith-based organizations, have a significant role to play in addressing the complex mental health challenges experienced by young people in Kenya. In a country where religion holds considerable sway, with over 80% of the population identifying as Christian (Pew Research Center, 2021), theological perspectives provide a unique framework for understanding and addressing mental health crises. Faith-based organizations, rooted in theological traditions, can offer both a sense of hope and practical healing in times of political instability and social injustice.

1.11.5 Theological Reflections and Faith-Based Organizations: Offering Hope and Healing

Theological reflections can provide crucial insight into the mental health struggles faced by young people, particularly those stemming from political instability, disenfranchisement, and corruption. The Christian narrative, in particular, offers themes of redemption, renewal, and hope, which are particularly resonant for a generation grappling with feelings of powerlessness. The concept of "hope in suffering," central to Christian theology, can be an essential foundation for mental health healing in Kenya's Gen Z. According to Moltmann (1993), hope is not merely a passive waiting for better circumstances but a dynamic and transformative force that can empower individuals to endure and overcome adversity. Theologically grounded interventions can offer this transformative hope, which is vital for young people who may feel trapped in cycles of despair and protest.

Faith-based organizations, which are deeply embedded in Kenyan society, have historically played a pivotal role in addressing both social and mental health challenges. For instance, the Kenya Conference of Catholic Bishops (KCCB) has long been involved in providing mental health support through their diocesan programs. These programs not only provide counselling services but also promote resilience through theological education and spiritual empowerment. By integrating faith with mental health care, faith-based organizations offer a holistic model that addresses the mind, body, and spirit. They create spaces for young people to engage with their struggles within a theological context, helping them process feelings of hopelessness through prayer, spiritual guidance, and community support. The KCCB's "Healing Through Faith" initiative, which started in 2022, provides both pastoral care and psychological support to young people affected by political and social instability (KCCB, 2022).

Furthermore, evangelical and Pentecostal churches, which have a significant following among Kenyan youth, also contribute to mental health healing through their faith-based initiatives. The "Healing the Nations" campaign by the Nairobi Pentecostal Church (2023) focuses on providing mental health support and spiritual healing for young people, particularly those affected by the socio-political turmoil that has characterized the past few years. These programs provide an important avenue for youth to channel their frustrations and traumas, not only in a therapeutic setting but also within a faith community that offers a sense of belonging, purpose, and spiritual restoration.

1.11.6 Addressing Spiritual Despair Alongside Mental Health

In Kenya, the interconnection between spiritual and mental health is often overlooked, yet they are deeply intertwined in the lived experiences of many people, particularly among Gen Z. Young people experiencing spiritual despair, such as a loss of meaning or purpose, often find themselves in a cycle of hopelessness that exacerbates their mental health struggles. Addressing this spiritual despair is not only necessary for their healing but is also central to any comprehensive mental health intervention. A study by Hvidt et al. (2020) reveals that religious practices and spiritual engagement can significantly enhance psychological well-being, particularly when they are integrated into mental health care strategies.

For Kenyan youth, spiritual despair is frequently linked to the erosion of hope in the future, especially when the political system, which they rely on for change, seems corrupt and inaccessible. Many young people have turned to protests, not only as a political outlet but as a form of existential expression in the face of despair. Theologically informed interventions offer a counter-narrative to this despair, reminding young people of their inherent worth, dignity, and the possibility of hope and redemption. Spiritual counselling, pastoral care, and faith-based mental health programs can address the deep sense of spiritual despondency that underpins much of the psychological distress experienced by youth.

Moreover, the role of prayer and religious rituals cannot be underestimated in this healing process. In many Kenyan communities, prayer is seen as both a spiritual and psychological intervention. In times of

despair, it serves as a means of connecting to a higher power, finding peace, and healing emotionally. Faith-based healing practices, such as prayer groups and faith-based counselling, have been shown to improve mental health outcomes in communities experiencing crisis (Koenig et al., 2012). Programs like the "Mental Health and Prayer" workshops by the African Christian Fellowship (2023) focus on integrating prayer with counselling services, offering a dual approach to healing that tackles both spiritual and mental health challenges.

1.11.7 Integrating Theology into Broader Mental Health Interventions

While theological reflections and faith-based organizations have a significant role in addressing mental health challenges, it is crucial that these efforts are integrated into broader mental health interventions. Theology, when combined with psychological care, can create a more comprehensive model of healing. In Kenya, there is growing recognition of the need to incorporate both faith and psychology in mental health care. The "Faith and Mental Health Integration Program," launched in 2022 by the Ministry of Health and the Kenya Psychological Association (KPA) encourages collaboration between mental health professionals and faith leaders to offer holistic care to those affected by mental health issues. By combining theological insights with clinical psychology, this program aims to offer young people a more comprehensive and accessible form of healing.

The integration of theological perspectives into mental health care ensures that the spiritual dimensions of suffering are addressed alongside the psychological ones. It also reinforces the idea that mental health is not only an individual issue but a communal one, deeply embedded in the social, cultural, and spiritual life of the community. Therefore, interventions that combine theological reflections with practical mental health care can offer a powerful means of healing for Kenya's Gen Z, particularly in a country where spirituality plays a central role in daily life.

The role of theology in healing the mental health struggles faced by Kenya's Gen Z cannot be underestimated. Theologically grounded reflections and faith-based interventions offer a framework of hope, resilience, and spiritual healing that complements psychological support. By addressing spiritual despair alongside mental health issues, faith-based organizations provide a holistic approach to healing that resonates deeply with young people who are grappling with the despair caused by political instability and social injustice. Through collaborative efforts between faith leaders, mental health professionals, and the broader community, Kenya can create pathways for healing that honor both the spiritual and psychological needs of its youth.

1.8 CONCLUSION

The mental health crisis faced by Kenya's Gen Z, rooted in poor governance, is a pressing issue that demands immediate attention and collective action. As this generation confronts rising levels of anxiety, depression, and despair, exacerbated by socio-political instability, the need for a holistic approach to mental health is more urgent than ever. Governance failures, which result in corruption, unemployment, and lack of access to basic services, directly undermine the well-being of young people, leaving them vulnerable to psychological distress. As the youth continue to bear the brunt of a system that marginalizes them, the protests and social unrest seen in Kenya are not just political statements—they are the cries of a generation in distress.

It is critical to acknowledge the deep intersection between mental health and governance. Poor governance not only exacerbates the material hardships faced by young people but also contributes to their sense of powerlessness and disenfranchisement. According to the World Health Organization (WHO, 2023), mental health disorders are closely linked to the broader socio- political and economic contexts in which individuals live. The mental health challenges faced by Kenya's Gen Z are a direct result of these systemic failures, making it imperative to not only address the symptoms but also the root causes. In this regard, comprehensive policy reform, transparent governance, and social justice initiatives are essential in breaking the cycle of mental distress among young people.

As we look toward solutions, it is clear that no single entity can address these challenges alone. The path to healing for Kenya's Gen Z lies in the collaborative efforts of policymakers, religious leaders, and mental health professionals. Policymakers must prioritize youth-focused policies that address unemployment, mental health services, and access to education. In tandem, religious leaders, who hold significant influence over Kenya's population, particularly among the youth, must continue to offer spiritual guidance and emotional support through faith-based initiatives. As seen in programs like the "Healing Through Faith" initiative by the Kenya Conference of Catholic Bishops (2022), faith-based organizations play a critical role in bridging the gap between mental health and spiritual well-being.

Furthermore, mental health advocates must continue to push for more robust mental health frameworks that incorporate the unique needs of the youth, particularly in areas disproportionately affected by poor governance. According to the Kenyan Ministry of Health (2022), only 1% of the national budget is allocated to mental health services, a stark contrast to the overwhelming need for such resources. This highlights the critical need for advocacy and investment in mental health infrastructure to address the increasing demands for services. Collaborations between these sectors, government, faith-based organizations, and mental health professionals, will be vital in crafting a comprehensive approach that

provides both immediate relief and long-term solutions for the mental health crisis facing Kenya's Gen Z.

Ultimately, addressing the mental health impacts of poor governance on Kenya's Gen Z is not just a matter of political or economic intervention. It requires a multifaceted approach that combines the practical with the spiritual, the individual with the community. The path forward must involve both systemic changes and a profound commitment to healing and restoration. By working together, these stakeholders can create a supportive environment where young people are empowered to face the challenges of the future with resilience and hope.

1.9 RECOMMENDATIONS

1.9.0 Establishing and Strengthening Mental Health Support Systems

The government of Kenya and relevant actors should prioritize, expand, and strengthen mental health support systems and make it accessible to the young population. This includes expanding funding for mental health services, the need to integrate counselling and psychosocial support systems in schools, higher education institutions, and community centres, and bringing on board trained mental health professionals at the national level. Establishment of toll-free helplines as well as online therapy platforms will help reach out to Gen Z populations who prefer a digitally enhanced communication system. Moreover, public awareness campaigns should aim to destigmatize mental health challenges, ensuring that youth see seeking help as a sign of strength rather than weakness.

1.9.1 Advocating for Inclusive Governance and Youth Participation

Policymakers at the national level must create meaningful platforms for youth participation in governance structures and decision-making. Youth engagement forums, participatory budgeting process, and continuous mentorship programs will empower Gen Z to voice out their concerns constructively. When young people feel heard and included in national conversations, it reduces frustration and restores trust in institutions. Transparency, accountability, and consistent communication between government leaders and the youth are critical to rebuilding confidence and preventing feelings of neglect and hopelessness.

1.9.2 Empowerment and Employment Creation programmes

Unemployment and economic exclusion remain key drivers of frustration among Kenyan youth. The government, in collaboration with the private sector, should implement sustainable job creation initiatives targeting young people, such as start-up incubation programs, skill development hubs, and incentives for youth-led enterprises. Equipping Gen Z with entrepreneurial and digital skills will enhance self-reliance and optimism about their future. Economic empowerment is not only a pathway to stability but also a key ingredient in nurturing mental resilience and a sense of purpose among young citizens.

1.9.3 Creation of Community-Based Healing and Resilience

Healing from the psychological scars of poor governance and civic unrest requires a collective effort rooted in community engagement. Faith-based organizations, local leaders, and civil society should collaborate to create safe spaces for dialogue, reflection, and collective healing. Art, music, and storytelling can serve as powerful mediums for expression and trauma recovery among young people. Additionally, incorporating peace education and emotional intelligence training into school curricula can foster empathy, resilience, and social cohesion—laying the foundation for a mentally healthier and more civically engaged generation.

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