



YORJA

YOUTH ORGANISATION FOR RESEARCH & JUSTICE ADVOCACY

WEBINAR REPORT

Mental Health Awareness Month 2026

Letters We Never Send

Mental Health, Justice, and the Emotional Realities of Peace Work

Event Type	Webinar (Online)
Platform	Zoom
Date	Friday, 29 May 2026
Duration	2 Hours (12:30 PM – 2:35 PM)
Organiser	Youth Organisation for Research and Justice Advocacy (YORJA)
Theme	Mental Health Awareness Month — May 2026

"Some of the most important conversations are letters we never send, the thanks we never get,
and the apologies never given."

— Enya Echeng, Deputy Executive Director, YORJA



1. Background and Context

Across transitional justice, peacebuilding, and civic engagement spaces, practitioners are routinely exposed to stories of violence, injustice, and systemic harm. While these processes are essential for accountability and societal transformation, they often carry significant emotional and psychological consequences for those engaged in this work. In recognition of Mental Health Awareness Month (May 2026), the Youth Organisation for Research and Justice Advocacy (YORJA), convened an online reflective and participatory engagement titled **Letters We Never Send: Mental Health, Justice, and the Emotional Realities of Peace Work**. The event created a safe and creative space for peace and justice practitioners to acknowledge, process, and share the emotional weight of their work. Emerging evidence highlights that professionals working in justice and peace contexts frequently experience secondary traumatic stress, emotional fatigue and burnout, and moral distress linked to systemic limitations and unresolved injustices. Despite this, conversations within the field remain largely focused on legal, institutional, and policy outcomes, with limited attention to the internal experiences of practitioners.

2. Objectives

The webinar was guided by the following objectives:

- To create a safe and reflective space for peace and justice practitioners to acknowledge and address the emotional and mental health impact of their work.
- To facilitate a practical 'Letters We Never Send' writing exercise as a tool for emotional decompression and processing.
- To highlight the importance of mental health in peacebuilding, justice, and advocacy work, especially during Mental Health Awareness Month.
- To shift focus beyond deliverables and prioritize the human side of practitioners.
- To foster collective acknowledgment and shared understanding among participants.

3. Program Overview

Time	Session	Facilitator
12:30 – 12:40 PM	Registration	Angella Alakit
12:40 – 12:50 PM	Opening Session: Welcome Remarks & Participant Introductions	Angeline Abuor, Executive Director, YORJA
12:50 – 1:30 PM	Framing Segment: Contextual reflections on mental health within justice and peace work	Adie Ugbong, MHPSS Officer
1:30 – 1:50 PM	Creative Expression: Selected reading / spoken word – 'A Letter We Never Send'	Patience Oben
1:50 – 2:20 PM	Dialogue Segment: Moderated panel discussion	Moderator: Adie Ugbong Panellists: Heba Assem, Mary Yvonne Ododah, Christella Niyonzima
2:20 – 2:30 PM	Audience Engagement: Live chat contributions, reflections, and letter-writing exercise	Angella Alakit



Time	Session	Facilitator
2:30 – 2:35 PM	Closing Remarks	Enya Echeng, Deputy Executive Director, YORJA

4. Session Summary

Opening and Icebreaker

The webinar opened with a welcome facilitated by Angella, who guided participants through an interactive icebreaker. Participants were invited to share their names, locations, and how they were feeling that day via the Zoom chat, setting a tone of openness and presence from the outset.

Anonymous Poll: Emotional Landscape of Practitioners

An anonymous poll was conducted to surface participants' emotional experiences. The results revealed a strikingly high level of emotional strain across the group:



Participants also identified their most common workplace stressors as excessive demands from family and friends, and chaotic work environments. Notably, zero participants reported having never experienced overwhelm, helplessness, or lingering preoccupation with work events.

Opening Remarks

Ms. Angeline Abuor, Executive Director of YORJA, delivered the opening remarks, drawing on personal experiences to underscore the critical need for practitioners to protect their mental health. Her remarks emphasized that peacebuilders carry the emotional weight of others, often at the expense of their own wellbeing.

Framing Presentation: The Human Side of Peace and Justice Work

Adie Ugbong, MHPSS Officer, delivered a detailed presentation examining the psychological dimensions of peace and justice work. The presentation explored the concept of secondary traumatic stress, the normalization of overwork and silent strength, and the systemic gaps in professional preparation that leave practitioners ill-equipped to manage the emotional toll of their roles.

Creative Expression: A Letter We Never Send

Ms. Patience Oben offered powerful spoken words and reflective reading to bring the concept of 'letters we never send' to life. The reading opened with a poignant address to practitioners — asking not just how they are professionally, but how they are truly doing. This segment set the emotional and creative tone for the letter-writing exercise that followed.

Panel Dialogue

A moderated discussion featured Christella Niyonzima, Mary Yvonne Ododah, and Heba Assem, guided by Adie Ugbong. A participant, David Taylor, was also invited to share reflections. The panel explored:

- Personal experiences of emotional strain and secondary trauma in their respective fields.
- The silence and stigma around mental health in peace and justice spaces.



- Realistic coping strategies and sustainable approaches to the work.
- The role of organizations and donors in supporting practitioner wellbeing.

Interactive Letter-Writing Exercise

Participants were invited to write their own personal 'Letter We Never Send' using a shared digital micro-board. This exercise enabled individuals to process difficult emotions, give voice to unspoken burdens, and experience the therapeutic value of reflective writing. Many participants reported feeling a sense of relief and emotional impact after completing their letters.

Closing Remarks

Enya Echeng, Deputy Executive Director of YORJA, delivered the closing remarks, reminding participants that the most meaningful exchanges in peace work are often the conversations we never get to have, the letters never sent, the gratitude never expressed, the apologies never given.

5. Key Themes Discussed

Mental Health as Everyday Emotional Infrastructure

Mental health was framed not only as a concern during illness or breakdown but as governing daily emotional functioning, how practitioners handle stress, process pain, cope with difficult experiences, rest, and relate with others.

The Human Cost of Peace and Justice Work

Practitioners in peace, justice, advocacy, and democracy work are constantly exposed to stories of violence, loss, injustice, displacement, and suffering. The session acknowledged these as 'not ordinary spaces,' and emphasized that those who inhabit them require dedicated support.

Expectation vs. Reality

There is significant pressure placed on practitioners to remain emotionally strong, calm during crises, and professionally functional, while in reality they carry heavy emotional burdens home and frequently experience exhaustion.

Harmful Coping Mechanisms and the Myth of Silent Strength

The panel examined the normalization of silent strength, including the emergence of specific harmful practitioner archetypes: the Overworker, the Disconnected, the Silent Carrier, and the Escapist. These patterns, while often invisible, contribute to long-term burnout and disengagement from work.

Systemic Gaps in Professional Preparation

Professional training in peacebuilding, transitional justice, and advocacy was identified as heavily skewed toward technical skills, responding to crises, managing projects, conducting advocacy with little to no provision for emotional processing, psychological first aid, or self-care frameworks.

The Power of Safe Spaces and Collective Processing

A recurring theme was the importance of creating environments where practitioners can process trauma collectively, rather than carrying it alone. The absence of such spaces, particularly during major crises (such as the Burundi political crisis of 2015), leaves practitioners without adequate emotional scaffolding.

Sustainable Peacebuilding Requires Supported People

The session reinforced that sustainable peacebuilding cannot be achieved through strong systems and institutions alone. It requires emotionally supported, psychologically healthy practitioners who are equipped to sustain themselves and their communities over the long term.

6. Key Outcomes and Insights

- Poll data confirmed high levels of emotional strain: 69% of participants felt overwhelmed many times after work, 54% frequently went home still preoccupied by stories or events, and a significant proportion experienced helplessness.
- Participants gained practical tools for emotional decompression, particularly through the 'Letters We Never Send' exercise, with many reporting feelings of relief and emotional release following the activity.
- The panel provided powerful personal and professional insights into the long-term emotional toll of peace and justice work, and offered realistic, actionable coping strategies.
- Collective recognition emerged that mental health support for practitioners is as critical as the support provided to affected communities.
- Strong emphasis was placed on the need for intentional rest, peer support systems, access to therapy, and organizational acknowledgment of emotional concerns.

7. Challenges Identified

- Practitioners frequently become indirect victims of others' trauma, absorbing and carrying heavy emotional burdens unconsciously.
- Emotional shutdown occurs as practitioners come to feel that their own pain is insignificant compared to community suffering, silencing legitimate personal needs.
- An overemphasis on project results, deliverables, and resilience narratives results in mental health being consistently deprioritized.
- There is a notable lack of safe spaces for collective emotional processing, particularly during major crises.
- The harmful normalization of silent strength means that struggling is perceived as weakness and suppressing emotions is unconsciously rewarded.
- Systemic failure to include emotional wellbeing in professional preparation and organizational budgeting represents a critical structural gap.
- Young people and new entrants to the field receive insufficient early orientation on the emotional weight of peace and justice work.

8. Recommendations

- Organizations and donors should allocate dedicated budgets for the psychosocial support and mental health of practitioners, recognizing this as a core programmatic need.
- Safe and intentional spaces should be created and institutionalized within organizations, where practitioners can process their experiences collectively and without judgement.
- Emotional wellbeing and mental health literacy should be integrated into professional preparation and onboarding for all individuals entering peace and justice work.
- Healthier coping strategies, including reflective writing, intentional rest, access to therapy, peer support, physical activity, and spiritual practices should be actively encouraged and modelled by senior practitioners.
- Organizations should ensure that mental health is prioritized alongside technical deliverables and community-facing programming in strategic planning and reporting.
- Senior practitioners should actively mentor those entering the field by protecting their mental health from the outset, and on remaining fully human while doing the work.
- Organizational culture should consciously shift from glorifying silent strength toward openly acknowledging and celebrating the human side of peace work.

9. Notable Quotes from the Session



“We become indirect victims of other people's trauma and don't realise we carry this burden.”

— Christella Niyonzima, Panelist

“When you see the community and what it's going through, you shut your emotions down, as it seems nothing compared to what the community is going through.”

— Mary Yvonne Ododah, Panelist

“Know when to stop. Stop responding to emails and reaching out and just rest. Encourage yourself that you did the best you could.”

— Heba Assem, Panelist

“We practitioners who work in children's affairs and gender spaces are often in pain and traumatic events. Peacebuilders carry a lot of other people's burdens, forgetting their own.”

— Ms. Angeline Abuor, Executive Director, YORJA

“Advocating to the donors on the importance of a dedicated budget for psychosocial wellbeing — mental health is just as important as the people we are trying to help.”

— David Taylor, Participant

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— Enya Echeng, Deputy Executive Director, YORJA

10. Conclusion

The Letters We Never Send webinar successfully highlighted the often-overlooked emotional toll of peace and justice work and provided both reflection and practical tools for better self-care among practitioners. By combining contextual framing, spoken words, personal testimony, panel dialogue, and an interactive writing exercise, the session reinforced that sustainable peacebuilding requires emotionally supported, psychologically healthy individuals at its core. The conversations underscored that protecting mental health is not a luxury but a necessity for long-term effectiveness in the field. This initiative by YORJA during Mental Health Awareness Month 2026 represents an important step toward breaking silence, reducing stigma, and building more humane and sustainable practices within the peace and justice sector.



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