

Our Mission

The Program in Global Mental Health Program at the Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai enhances access to mental health care for people in East Harlem and around the world. Our program develops, trains, and educates ISMMS students, residents, and faculty to provide mental health services to those who need them most.

Program Partnerships:

- Instituto Terapéutico y Psicológico para la Familia, Jarabacoa, Dominican Republic
- Grenada Ministry of Health
- HaitiChildren, Williamson, Haiti
- The Minds Foundation, in collaboration with GMERS Medical College and Sumandeeep Vidyapeeth University, Gujarat, India
- The Aftermath of the Great East Japan Earthquake of 2011
- The Carter Center and the Ministry of Health, Monrovia, Liberia
- Belize Ministry of Health
- East Harlem Health Outreach Project
- Human Rights Work with Migrants, New York, New Jersey, and Texas

Connecting with Those on the Other Side

Ludwing Florez-Salamanca, MD

Joao* is 37 years old, is passionate about soccer and the European league, but has never been to a match since he has been locked in his room for the last 22 years due to paranoia. I had hoped that he would come out for me, but the nurse doing the home visit with me was less optimistic given the previous failed attempts. He talked to us for twenty minutes or so. The wooden door was always shut, but I could tell other doors started to open on the other side.

Many other doors also opened during my global mental health collaboration in Cape Verde (Africa), where I met Joao. Those open doors allowed me to identify many of the needs and aspirations of the community, patients and providers. As part of the needs assessment I also identified opportunities and started building relationships with stakeholders. All with the goal of establishing a long-standing collaboration to build the capacity of the local mental health services.

In Cape Verde, patients like Joao go undiagnosed for many years, and when treatment is started it is often not evidence-based. Both the medical director of the local services and the director of planning from the ministry of health were interested in training options for the local general practitioners, psychologist, social workers and psychiatrists. I am optimistic that developing and supporting those trainings can improve the care patients are getting.

Another potential way of improving care and impacting the community is by partnering with local organizations to start peer-run support groups for people with alcohol use disorder. Alcohol use disorder is among the most prevalent mental health problems in the country. Despite that, treatment and support for patients struggling with it are very incipient. The country's national formulary, for example, does not include medications for the outpatient treatment of alcohol use disorders. When I brought that up to the director of the national pharmacy he wanted to learn more about those medications and was willing to include them. Collaborating with the local authorities in developing and implementing protocols for the management of chronic alcohol use could also help doctors feel more comfortable providing the much-needed treatment.

Throughout the collaboration patients were appreciative, providers and administrators were receptive and eager to improve the services. Many doors were open. There were many humans, institutions and systems of care on the other side. The program in global mental health allowed me an invaluable opportunity to connect with them.



Elena, the local nurse that went with Dr. Florez-Salamanca to assess Joao, speaks to him through the door. Joao lives in a separate room at his mother's house, in a small town close to a volcano in the island of Fogo.

**Name was changed to protect patient's privacy*

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India is now included among the countries where homosexuality is no longer criminalized and alternative gender is recognized in the constitution. Our curiosity as to whether socio-cultural acceptance has followed this legal acceptance and what role it has played in the mental health of the LGBT Community took us on a journey of rediscovering India through a different lens. The Global Health Summer Internship not only gave us an opportunity to explore how adverse childhood experiences affect resilience in the LGBT population but also took us through the daily lives of the transgender and Hijra community of Gujarat, India.

Two months in Gujarat ended up being an intense crash course in Global Health, exposing us to nearly every experience one could imagine. Over years of oppression, the LGBT community of Gujarat has learned to live “in the closet”, isolated from the general population. One of our main challenges was gaining the trust of our participants in order to have them feel comfortable enough to share their experiences and views with us. What we learned was not something we could have found in the books or newspapers. Everyday meetings with this community gave us glimpses of the kind of personal closet they have made for themselves and even though the much awaited legal acceptance has arrived, social acceptance is nowhere close to making lives easier for the community. The majority of them lives dual lives where they pretend to ascribe to heteronormative ideals while living with constant stress and anxiety. In addition, there is limited support due to lack of awareness among mental health care providers, rendering them unable to seek help.

We also had the chance to meet the marginalized and shunned ‘Hijra’/‘Kinnar’ Community, a group of transgender individuals with a very different cultural set up compared to the rest of society. We travelled to different cities to meet the ‘Kinnars’ in groups and congregations where they lived. We wanted to have our focus group discussions in a place where they would feel safe, motivated and comfortable to open up to us, as opposed to calling them to our offices. It was nothing short of a life changing experience to hear their stories and empathize with them. Every time we conducted a focus group discussion, we were taken on a journey of their life struggles and successes, which often included their need for a mental health care provider attuned to their needs and lifestyle. They also brought into light their need for a more inclusive health care environment, which can only result from increasing awareness and acceptance.

Overall it was a great learning experience, which took us through pages of global health work with practical hands-on learning. It taught us skills which we would forever cherish as Global Public Mental Health students.



Amidst a focus group discussion with the Kinnar Community in Gujarat, India in August 2019

Check out our Program in Global Mental Health Website!

<https://icahn.mssm.edu/education/medical/md-program/global-mental-health>