

**OFFICE OF THE VICE-CHANCELLOR**



**INAUGURAL LECTURE OF PROFESSOR CHARITY SYLVIA AKOTIA**

**THEME:**

***“WHEN LIFE BECOMES UNBEARABLE: DYNAMICS AND COMPLEXITIES OF  
SUICIDAL BEHAVIOUR AND PREVENTION IN A CULTURAL CONTEXT”***

**ADDRESS BY:**

**PROFESSOR NANA ABA APPIAH AMFO  
VICE - CHANCELLOR, UNIVERSITY OF GHANA**

**THURSDAY, MARCH 9, 2023  
GREAT HALL, UNIVERSITY OF GHANA**



Pro Vice-Chancellors,

Registrar,

Provosts,

Deans, Directors, Heads of Department,

Our Distinguished Lecturer, Professor Charity Sylvia Akotia,

Past and Present Senior Officers of the University,

Faculty, Staff and Members of Convocation,

Students, Alumni, and Friends of the University,

Family and Friends of the Lecturer,

Corporate Executives,

Government Officials,

Members of the Diplomatic Corps,

Esteemed Traditional Rulers,

Eminent Clergy,

Members of Various Groups and Associations present,

Friends from the Media,

Invited Guests,

Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen present in the Great Hall and those joining us across our various media platform:

Good evening.

I welcome you all warmly to the first inaugural lecture for this year. Inaugural lectures provide the platform for academics who have reach the pinnacle of their career (which is the professorial rank) to share with the university

community and the general public, insights from their years of research, teaching and practice.

Permit me to refresh your memory on the series of interesting and discerning lectures we were treated to during the past academic year:

1. Prof. Eric Sampane-Donkor was first to mount the stage on the topic “The 130-Year War between Man and Pneumococcus: Who is Winning?”
2. Then we had Prof. Kwasi Appeaning Addo who’s lecture focused on Coastal Erosion in Ghana.
3. Prof. Audrey Sitsofe Gadzekpo of the Department of Communication Studies “Took the Gown to Town” and shared insights on Media in Ghana’s Democratic Journey as a Scholar-Activist
4. Prof. Dzodzi Akoyo Tsikata in May 2022 delivered her inaugural lecture titled “The Road has Many Stories: Encounters between the State and Citizens of the Different Ghanas”.
5. In the Eyes of a Beholder, Prof. Alfred Edwin Yawson of the University of Ghana Medical School dissected Ghana’s Health System towards 2030 and beyond.
6. Prof. Martin Oteng-Ababio took his turn with a focus on the environment on a lecture titled “Double Standards, Single Purpose: Deconstructing the ‘FENCE WALL’ for Sustainable Municipal Waste Management
7. Finally, Prof. Lydia Aziato rapped it up with her inaugural lecture on “Breast Cancer Care and Pain Management”

This evening, we are privileged to have one of our female scholars, who is a former Dean of the School of Social Sciences, Professor Charity Sylvia Akotia engage us on the school of life with the topic: “***When Life Becomes Unbearable: Dynamics and Complexities of Suicidal Behaviour and Prevention in a Cultural Context***”

Distinguished ladies and gentlemen, life in literal terms or described in layman’s language can be “hard”. Sometimes, it gets so tough to a point which seems just impossible and unbearable. But today’s lecture brings hope to those who are in despair; giving up or ending your life is not an option to consider.

Issues about suicide may appear to be remote, but statistics on individuals who have contemplated suicide is very glaring and alarming. Reading the abstract, I noted that according to the World Health Organization (2021), globally, about 700,000 people take their lives each year, and for every suicidal death, there are at least 20 suicide attempts. You can do the mathematics for yourselves – that approximately 14,000,000 suicide attempts. And this figure obviously represents only recorded cases.

Unfortunately, the factors that trigger such suicidal thoughts are multi-faceted ranging from what some consider “minor” issues like not getting a programme of one’s choice at the university, heartbreak etc. to severe ones like loss of loved ones and unbearable economic hardships. Indeed, the effects of suicide as reported are very devastating.

There is therefore the need to arm ourselves with some coping mechanisms to ensure that we keep pressing on when the centre appears not to hold any longer. I don't know the content of this evening's presentation but one thing I can assure you of from the lyrics of the famous hymn written in 1882 by Priscilla Jane Owens is "*when the strong tides lift and the cables strain, remember, we have an Anchor*". While looking forward to a very revealing lecture, I trust that the lecturer will draw from her rich worth of extensive research and experience to enlighten us all - there is help and hope.

Admittedly, the economic situation in the country is not in the best of shape and it is biting hard even for those in the upper middle class. This lecture is therefore very timely. In this lecture, Professor Akotia takes us on a journey from the genesis of her love in research generally to suicidal behaviour and its prevention. She will share with us some literature and statistics on suicide and the dynamics and complexities of suicidal behaviour. The lecturer will highlight the role culture plays in this discussion and will provide recommendations to guide the prevention of suicidal behaviour in Ghana.

Professor Charity Silvia Akotia, on the occasion of your inaugural lecture (and in the spirit of international women's' day which was observed yesterday), we celebrate you on behalf of the University community, family and friends for braving the odds and rising to this height. Congratulations to the Department of Psychology for producing another professor.

Ladies and gentlemen, permit me at this juncture to introduce our distinguished lecturer for today.

## **PROFILE**

### **Education**

Professor Charity Sylvia Akotia is a Social/Community Psychologist by training and has about three decades' experience in teaching, research, and extension service. She grew up in many towns and cities, as her parents were both educationists. She started her basic education at the Evangelical Presbyterian Primary School in Kwamekrom, Volta Region (now Oti Region) where her parents were posted to teach. She passed the Common Entrance Examination at the age of 11 years and proceeded to Nkonya Secondary School, also in the Oti Region, for her "O" Level education. She later enrolled at Kpando Secondary School for her sixth form education and completed in 1982. In that same year, she gained admission to the University of Ghana to read a Bachelor of Arts degree in Psychology and Russian. She successfully graduated with a Bachelor of Arts (Hons) degree in Psychology and Russian. After her national service, she gained admission to pursue a Master of Arts degree in Community Psychology at Wilfrid Laurier University, Waterloo, Ontario, Canada. She successfully completed her programme and graduated in April 1992, four months before the scheduled time of graduation.

### **Academic and Administrative Roles**

In October 1992, she was appointed as lecturer at the Department of Psychology, University of Ghana. In 1998, she enrolled in a part-time doctoral programme at Department of Psychology, University of Ghana and was the first to have graduated at the Department in 2004. She was promoted to the rank of Senior lecturer in 1998, Associate Professor in 2013 and Professor in October 2020.

Professor Akotia is the founding Dean and the first female Dean of the School of Social Sciences, College of Humanities, University of Ghana (from 2014 to 2020). As the Founding Dean of the School of Social Sciences, she created a conducive environment for effective learning and teaching to take place. Considering the strategic objectives of the School of Social Sciences and that of the University of Ghana in general, she initiated a number of programmes to boost the image of the School. The School's International Conference which became its flagship programme in the calendar of the School of Social Sciences is worth mentioning. This conference was sought after by both local and international scientists and researchers on yearly basis. Other programmes include the Student-Industry-Meeting Day (SIM Day), where resource persons from industry were invited to interact with students in the School; training workshops for non-teaching staff, Social Scientist Seminar Series, School Week, and many more. During her tenure as Dean, she also introduced the first School cloth for students, faculty and non-teaching staff.

Prior to being appointed as Dean of the School of Social Sciences, she served as Head of the Psychology Department for two terms. Her work as Head of Department was sterling, as she has helped introduce numerous programmes in the Department of Psychology. Professor Akotia is currently back to the Department of Psychology, University of Ghana where she coordinates the Social and Community Psychology Programme at the postgraduate level. She is currently the Chairperson of the Graduate Committee at the Department of Psychology.

## **Research**

As a Social and Community Psychologist, Professor Akotia's main research focuses on suicide and suicide prevention. She has collaborated widely with several academics across the globe. Her main collaborators include Professor Birthe Loa Knizek, and Professor Heidi Marie Hjelmeland both from the Norwegian University of Science and Technology (NTNU), Trondheim, Norway; Professor Eugene Kinyanda, MRC, Uganda; Professor Joseph Osafo, Dr. Johnny Andoh-Arthur, Dr. Emmanuel Nii-Boye Quarshie, all of the Department of Psychology, University of Ghana, Legon; and Dr. Winifred Asare-Doku, and Dr. Jennifer Peprah, currently in Australia. Professor Akotia's publications have appeared in refereed peer-reviewed journals including BMC Public Health, Psychological Studies, Transcultural Psychiatry, Journal of Civil Society, Journal of Psychology in Africa, International Journal of Nursing Studies, Social



Psychological and Personality Science, International Journal of Offender Therapy and Comparative Criminology, SAGE Open, BMC Psychiatry, Journal of Child Sexual Abuse, Death Studies, International Journal of Qualitative Studies on Health and Well-being, Journal of Community Psychology, Crisis, Mental Health, Religion and Culture, Journal of Religion and Health among others. Her research on suicidal behaviour is seminal and contributes to knowledge and the understanding of suicidal behaviour in a cultural context more generally. Aside suicide research, Professor Akotia has also published on gender and gender role attitudes. She has to her credit three edited books, eight book chapters, fifty-five journal articles and one technical report. She has participated in over sixty conferences/workshops and seminars across the globe. The overarching goal guiding her research on suicidal behaviour is to first, understand the complex issues that suicidal behaviour presents and secondly, to initiate suicide prevention programmes to help persons who are in suicidal crisis. She is currently engaged in research on the conceptualization of personhood in an African context, a research project sponsored by the Mellon Foundation. She is also collaborating with colleagues from the University of Konstanz, Germany, and nine other universities on the psychology of eating behaviour.

## **Teaching**

Professor Akotia loves teaching. She was a Teaching and Research Assistant during her Master's programme at Wilfrid Laurier University in Canada where she provided tutorials to undergraduate students. At the Department of

Psychology, University of Ghana, she has taught several courses including Elements of Psychology, Introduction to Psychology, Motivation and Emotion, Developmental Psychology, Social Psychology and Community Psychology. Currently, she teaches Community Psychology at the undergraduate level, and Research Methods, Contemporary Issues in Social psychology, and Social Psychology of Gender at the postgraduate level. To date, she has successfully supervised and/or co-supervised 15 PhD dissertations, 52 MPhil theses and over 400 BA students' long essays. Her scholarly services extend beyond the borders of University of Ghana, as she serves as assessor and/or external examiner to other institutions including University of Cape Coast, University of Education at Winneba, Stellenbosch University, Norwegian University of Science and Technology (NTNU), University of Nairobi, and Central University, Ghana.

## **Mentorship**

Professor Akotia is a staunch believer in mentorship. It comes as no surprise that as Dean of the School of Social Sciences, she introduced an award for Mentorship for faculty. Over the years, she has provided mentorship to many of her students, particularly graduate students. Today, many of these students have either completed their postgraduate programmes or are in graduate school. Many have also found themselves in lectureship positions in various academic institutions including the University of Ghana.

## **Board/Committee Membership**

Professor Akotia has served on numerous Boards and Committees at the University of Ghana and has chaired the School of Social Sciences Management Committee, Senior /Junior Staff Appointments and Promotions Committee, College of Humanities, Examination Malpractices Committee, Supplementary Re-sit Examinations Committee, College of Humanities, and Panel to Conduct Appraisal of the Chartering of Catholic University College, Fiapre.

She has also been a member of the Business Executive Committee (BEC), Examinations Superintending Committee, Examination Malpractices Committee, College of Humanities Representative on Research, Innovation and Development (RID) Management Board, College of Humanities Academic Board, Academic Quality Assurance Committee, Vice Chancellor's Committee - Medical/Dentistry Expansion Team, University of Ghana Academic Board, Various Search Panels for Senior Administrative Positions, Panel to Conduct Appraisal of the Chartering of Methodist University College, Panel to Conduct Appraisal of the Chartering of Pentecost University, College of Humanities Representative on the Counselling and Placement Board. She was also the University of Ghana's representative on the Presbyterian University Appointments and Promotions Committee. She currently chairs the Implementation team of the Kumasi and Takoradi City Campuses of University of Ghana. As Chair of this Committee, Professor Akotia, together with her Team members, continue to work hard to lay the foundation for a successful implementation of the City Campuses. She is currently a member

of the Executive Committee, International Association for Suicide Prevention (IASP), the National Representative and a Co-Chair of the Council of National Representatives of IASP. As co-Chair of the Council, she is responsible for three of the four Zones as demarcated by IASP.

### **Advisory Boards and Professional Association Membership**

Professor Akotia has also served on international Advisory Boards including being a member of the Advisory Board for the EQUAL Seed Grant, New York University (NYU) and Member of the Scientific Advisory Board of the Health in Context Project (HEIKO), NTNU, Trondheim, Norway. Charity Akotia belongs to Professional Associations including the International Association for Suicide Prevention (IASP), Ghana Psychological Association (GPA), Ghana Psychological Council, Ghana Association for Suicide Prevention (GASP), and Critical Suicidology.

### **Family**

Professor Akotia comes from Hohoe in the Volta Region and is the fourth of six children born to Mr. Emmanuel Baete Alover and Mrs. Mary Semanu Alover (both deceased). Together with her husband, Mr. Mathias Akotia (of blessed memory) they have four boys: Dennis, Steven, Nigel, and Michael. She fellowships with The Church in Accra and her strong

faith in God guides her living. During her leisure hours, Professor Akotia enjoys listening to music and she also loves dancing.

Distinguished ladies and gentlemen, I present to you the woman of the moment, Prof. Charity Silvia Akotia to deliver her inaugural lecture.

***Professor Nana Aba Appiah Amfo***

***Vice-Chancellor***

***March 9, 2023***