



Women's Mental Health:

An Evidence Based Review



WOMEN'S MENTAL HEALTH

AN EVIDENCE BASED REVIEW



**Mental Health Determinants and Populations
Department of Mental Health and Substance Dependence
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Preface

We are pleased to present this evidence based review which contains a reappraisal of the status of women's mental health problems in different regions of the world. It updates and reactualizes a first publication on Psychosocial and Mental Health Aspects of Women's Health issued by the Divisions of Mental and Family Health in 1993.

Over the years, the work of many WHO departments has converged with the concerns of the Key Centre for Women's Health in Society, University of Melbourne, in documenting the impact of discrimination and low socio-economic status on the health of women. More recently, there has been a shift from a focus on "women" to a focus on "gender" as a critical determinant of health. We are committed to the integration of gender issues in all our work and to the utilization of gender analysis in the development of mental health policies and programmes. In line with the recommendations articulated in the Beijing Platform of Action, the Programme of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development, and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, we are strengthening attention to the tremendous health burden of women that is created by gender discrimination, poverty, social position, and various forms of violence against women.

In the Global Burden of Disease, it is estimated that depression will become the second most important cause of disease burden in the world by the year 2020. Women in developed and developing countries alike are almost twice as likely as men to experience depression. Another two of the leading causes of disease burden estimated for the year 2020, namely violence and self inflicted injuries, have special relevance for women's mental health.

This document adopts a health determinants framework for examining the evidence related to women's poor mental health. From this perspective, public policy including economic policy, socio-cultural and environmental factors, community and social support, stressors and life events, personal behaviour and skills, and availability and access to health services, are all seen to exercise a role in determining women's mental health status. Similarly, when considering the differences between women and men, a gender approach has been used. While this does not exclude biological or sex differences, it considers the critical roles that social and cultural factors and unequal power relations between men and women play in promoting or impeding mental health. Such inequalities create, maintain and exacerbate exposure to risk factors that endanger women's mental health, and are most graphically illustrated in the significantly different rates of depression between men and women, poverty and its impact, and the phenomenal prevalence of violence against women.

The document collects and analyses the latest research evidence pertaining to the study of these issues and identifies the most pertinent risk factors and social causes that account for much of the poor mental health of millions of women around the globe. It also highlights the current gaps in knowledge that must be addressed through cross-cultural epidemiological, behavioural and operational research, especially in the developing countries, since most of the present research is directed at the situation in the richer, developed countries. Finally, the document provides pointers to the most

pressing issues that need to be considered by national policy and programme authorities in order to improve the mental health status of women.

Although it is not intended to be used as a guideline *per se*, it is our hope that readers will benefit from the analysis of evidence provided in this document and be guided on the priorities for research and action in this critical area. As a follow up to this review, we will address the need for a more practical, user-friendly guide to assist health workers and managers in becoming aware of their vital role in alleviating the mental health problems of women through a variety of individual and community-based interventions. In the meantime, WHO along with its collaborating centres, will continue to provide technical support to countries upon their request, to develop culturally sensitive policies and programmes addressing the individual and social risk factors that account for the pervasive damage to so many women's mental wellbeing in all countries of the world.

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Introduction

In the discussion of the determinants of poor mental health of women, it has become imperative to move from a focus on individual and “lifestyle” risk factors to a recognition of the broader, economic, legal and environmental factors that affect women’s lives and constrain their opportunities to control the determinants of their health. Social factors can and do change within and between countries in ways that promote or retard gender development and empowerment (UNDP 1997). The identification and modification of the social factors that influence women’s mental health holds out the possibility of primary prevention of certain mental disorders by reducing their incidence.

In this review, a gendered, social model of health is used to investigate critical determinants of women’s mental health with the overall objective of contributing to improved, more effective promotion of women’s mental health that is grounded in research evidence. Risk factors for mental disorder as well as for good mental health are addressed and where possible, a clear distinction has been made between the opportunities that exist for individual action and individual behaviour change and those that are dependent on factors outside the control of the individual woman.

Where poverty, inequality and social disadvantage are entrenched, the health beliefs of individuals may count for nothing in terms of being able to reduce behavioural risk factors. As Farmer (1996) has observed ‘Throughout the world, those least likely to comply are those least able to comply.’

It is essential to recognise how the socio-cultural, economic, legal, infrastructural and environmental factors that affect women’s mental health are configured in each country or community setting. Only by responding to the complexities and particularities of women’s lives can health promotion strategies hope to increase the opportunities women want and need to control the determinants of their health.

If programmes to promote women’s mental health focus on the reduction of individual ‘lifestyle’ risk factors, they may neglect the very factors that bring that lifestyle into being. Moreover, if such programmes fail to meet their objectives, they carry a considerable risk of misattributing that failure to the women towards whom they were directed. Such a misattribution precludes an examination of the features of the programmes themselves or of the social circumstances that the programmes did not or could not address.

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