

# NATIONS FOR MENTAL HEALTH

WHO/MSA/NAM/97.4

## A Focus on Women



Division of Mental Health  
and Prevention of Substance Abuse

**World Health Organization**  
Geneva

## **Nations for Mental Health:**

### **An Initiative for Mental Health in Underserved Populations**

#### **Objectives of Nations for Mental Health**

- To enhance the attention of people and governments of the world to the effects of mental health problems and substance abuse on the social well-being and physical health of the world's underserved populations. A first step is to increase awareness and concern of the importance of mental health through a series of key high profile regional and international events. Secondly, efforts will be devoted to building up the will of the key political authorities to participate. Thirdly, and finally, efforts are to be directed at securing political commitments by decision-makers.
- To establish a number of demonstration projects in each of the six WHO regions of the world. They are meant to illustrate the potential of collaborative efforts at country level, with the view of leading on to projects of a larger scale.
- To encourage technical support between countries for service development, research and training.

The implementation of the programme depends on voluntary contributions from governments, foundations, individuals and others. It receives financial and technical support from the Eli Lilly and Company Foundation, the Government of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, the Institute of Psychiatry at the Maudsley Hospital of London (United Kingdom), the Free and Hanseatic City of Hamburg (Germany), the Villa Pini Foundation (Chieti, Italy), Columbia University (New York, USA), the Laboratoires Servier (Paris, France) and the International Foundation for Mental Health and Neurosciences (Geneva, Switzerland).

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# **A Focus on Women**

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Division of Mental Health and  
Prevention of Substance Abuse

**World Health Organization**  
Geneva

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## Preface

The World Health Organization has established a new initiative called 'Nations for Mental Health' to deal with the increasing burdens of mental health and substance abuse worldwide. The main goal of the programme is to improve the mental health and psychosocial well being of the world's underserved populations.

Solutions to mental health and substance abuse problems entail a joint mobilization of social, economic and political forces as well as substantial changes in governmental policies related to education, health, and economic development in each country. This demands an intense and sustained effort from the nations of the world through joint cooperation between governments, nongovernmental organizations and the organizations within the United Nations system. The programme is of utmost importance to the work of WHO and WHO is willing to lead and coordinate this ambitious task. Several international meetings and launchings have been organized, in collaboration with other international organizations and academic institutions. A number of demonstration projects related to the programme have already been initiated in several countries. These projects are meant to illustrate and/or demonstrate the potential of collaborative efforts at country level, with the view of leading on to projects of a larger scale.

This document describes the background, rationale and implementation procedures for a range of potential demonstration projects addressing women's mental health. The mental health problems targeted include depression, anxiety and, more generally, psychological distress, sexual violence, domestic violence and escalating rates of substance abuse. The purpose of the document is to stimulate discussion and action in the areas of treatment, prevention and promotion through the development, implementation and evaluation of projects involving: policies and legislation, primary care, worksites, the criminal justice system, community services and supports, grassroots activities and use of the media.

This document was written by Dr Michelle K. Gomel, from the Division of Mental Health and Prevention of Substance Abuse, World Health Organization, Geneva, Switzerland. Critical feedback on this document was provided by Dr Claudia Garcia Moreno from the World Health Organization, Geneva and Dr Trudy Harpham and Ms Ilona Blue from the South Bank University, United Kingdom.

I am very pleased to present this document as part of the global process of raising awareness and concern about the effects of mental health problems of women. It is hoped that this important document will help support health ministers, ministry officials, and regional health planners whose task is to deliver and improve mental health policy and services within a strategic context.

**Dr. J. A. Costa e Silva**

Director

Division of Mental Health and Prevention of Substance Abuse (MSA)  
World Health Organization

## Executive summary

Mental health problems are of significant public health importance. A World Bank report estimated that these problems account for 10.5% of all disability. This compares with much lower rates for cancer, heart disease and for cerebrovascular disease. In addition, behaviour-related problems such as violence, substance abuse, sexually transmitted diseases, diarrhoea, malnutrition, tuberculosis, accidents and injuries were responsible for over 30% of all disability (Murray and Lopez, 1996).

The burden resulting from mental and behavioural problems is as significant in developing countries as it is in industrialized countries. Yet in many developing countries many patients suffering from mental disorders and/or behaviour-related problems are not recognized and therefore do not receive adequate treatment or intervention.

The situation in developing countries or among underserved populations is even more alarming for women than for men. Women are integral to all aspects of society, yet the multiple roles that they fulfill in society render them at greater risk of experiencing mental disorders than others in the community. In addition to the many pressures placed on them, women must contend with significant gender discrimination and the associated factors of poverty, hunger, malnutrition, overwork, domestic violence and sexual and reproductive violence. Failure to address women's health and mental problems has damaging social and economic consequences for communities (WHO, 1995).

In investigating those mental, behavioural and social problems that affect women either exclusively or to a greater extent than men we find higher rates of the following: depression, anxiety, psychological distress, sexual violence, domestic violence and escalating rates of substance use.

A comprehensive plan to improve women's mental health requires action at a number of levels, including the development of policies and legislation, the provision of interventions through population-based settings, ensuring that

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