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A Primer on Women and Girls' Mental Health

Improving the lives of women and girls has been shown to yield better long-term outcomes for families, communities, and global economies. For instance, investing in girls' education is one of the most effective tools for empowering women and generating broader societal benefits. It is connected to increased workforce participation and employment opportunities, improved individual and family health outcomes, and higher income-generation that yields undeniable returns. Working women also tend to reinvest the majority of their incomes back into their families, helping to improve the lives of future generations. However, in order to achieve these positive outcomes and broader societal benefits, it is imperative to support women and girls' mental health - a factor that is frequently overlooked as a major determinant of impact in key issue areas such as education, employment, and health.

Introduction

Mental health is the leading cause of disability for women globally, with studies reporting high rates of depression and anxiety among women and girls.¹ In comparison to men, women are twice as likely to report suffering from depression with symptoms including persistent sadness, loss of appetite, inability to sleep, and difficulty completing everyday tasks.² Even prior to the pandemic, 1 in 5 women in the U.S. reported having a mental health related challenge such as depression, post traumatic stress disorder, or an eating disorder,³ and nearly a quarter of teenage girls exhibited depressive symptoms.⁴ COVID-19 has further exacerbated mental health challenges that were already disproportionately facing women and girls, creating a critical need for wise, targeted investments that address these issues.

In this primer, we elevate the critical intersectionality of women and girls' mental health to achieve better outcomes in the areas of education, health, and economic empowerment. We then suggest opportunities for philanthropy to advance these elements with greater impact.

Education

Evidence suggests girls face unique challenges in school related to gender-based expectations and stereotypes that impact educational outcomes, and subsequently, future employment opportunities. For example, research has found that girls are less likely to receive encouragement and support from their teachers and peers in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math (STEM) subjects, which decreases their confidence and motivation to pursue these more traditionally male-dominated fields of study.⁵ The underrepresentation and negative stereotypes of women and girls in STEM can lead to a decreased sense of belonging and feelings of social isolation, both of which have been associated with higher rates of mental health challenges like anxiety and depression.⁶ These factors have been shown to have negative impacts on educational attainment, completion rates, and employment satisfaction.⁷

Philanthropy can support teacher training programs that apply inclusive and gender-responsive teaching practices in classrooms to attract and retain girls in STEM programming. Funders can also support initiatives that focus on incorporating gender-responsive career counseling and mentorship programming in schools that encourage girls' participation in STEM courses and future pursuit of STEM careers.

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2 Brody DJ, Pratt LA, Hughes J. Prevalence of depression among adults aged 20 and over: United States, 2013–2016. NCHS Data Brief, no 303. Hyattsville, MD: National Center for Health Statistics. 2018.

3 American Psychiatric Association. (2017). Mental health disparities: Women's mental health. <https://www.psychiatry.org/File%20Library/Psychiatrists/Cultural-Competency/Mental-Health-Disparities/Mental-Health-Facts-for-Women.pdf>

4 Anxiety & Depression Association of America. (n.d.). Girls and teens. <https://adaa.org/find-help/by-demographics/women-and-young-girls/girls-and-teens>

5 National Girls Collaborative Project. (2022). The state of girls and women in STEM. <https://ngcproject.org/resources/state-girls-and-women-stem>

6 Settles, I. H., (2014). Women in STEM: Challenges and determinants of success and well-being. American Psychological Association. <https://www.apa.org/science/about/psa/2014/10/women-stem>

7 Trout, A. L., Nordness, P. D., Pierce, C. D., & Epstein, M. H. (2003). Research on the academic status of children with emotional and behavioral disorders: A review of the literature from 1961 to 2000. *Journal of Emotional and Behavioral Disorders, 11*(6), 198-210. <https://experts.nebraska.edu/en/publications/research-on-the-academic-status-of-children-with-emotional-and-be>

Health

Women and girls face unique health challenges that are interconnected with mental health issues, yet mental health is not often prioritized as a part of women and girls' healthcare. For instance, women and girls experiencing common reproductive health issues (e.g., infertility, postpartum complications, menopause) have an increased risk of depression and anxiety.⁸ Furthermore, women and adolescent girls tend to experience higher rates of abuse than men, which can negatively affect their overall health and lead to mental health impacts such as PTSD, depression, and substance misuse.⁹ The causal links between the mental and physical health of women and girls can also work in both directions. For example, women and girls with depression and anxiety also experience increased physical health problems such as heart disease, obesity, and chronic pain.¹⁰

The bi-directional relationship between physical and mental health highlights the opportunity to fund services that meet women and girls in spaces they already are, such as primary care, obstetrics/gynecology, and pediatric practices. Philanthropy can also support advocacy efforts that elevate the critical link between the physical and mental health of women and girls by lifting up underfunded areas (e.g. maternal mental health) and scaling effective policy solutions that increase access to mental health, such as coverage of family-based therapies.

Economic Empowerment

In 2020, the global labor force participation rate for women hit the lowest in the last three decades, as women with children dropped out of the labor market during the pandemic at much higher rates than men with children.¹¹ While women have been historically responsible for caring for children, adult family members with disabilities, and aging parents, disruptions of COVID-19 further exacerbated the negative impacts on women's mental health, including higher rates of anxiety and depression.¹² While the U.S. women's labor force has generally rebounded, female employment rates still remain below pre-pandemic levels.¹³ There are significant long-term consequences for women leaving the workforce that widen an already established equity gap, including loss of benefits, lack of advancement opportunities, and financial insecurity.

Funders can better achieve their goals related to empowering women in the workforce by supporting women's mental health. This may include advocating for policy change and supporting research efforts focused on improving workplace mental health and well-being. Funders can partner and collaborate with groups advocating for policies aimed at attracting, retaining, and promoting women, such as: a national parental leave policy, child care service reimbursements, equity in pay structure, and schedule flexibility.

8 Hope, H., Pierce, M., Johnstone, E. D., Myers, J., & Abel, K. M. (2022). The sexual and reproductive health of women with mental illness: a primary care registry study. *Archives of women's mental health*, 25(3), 585–593. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s00737-022-01214-y>

9 Eom, E., Restaino, S., Perkins, A. M., Neveln, N., & Harrington, J. W. (2014). Sexual harassment in middle and high school children and effects on physical and mental health. *Clinical Pediatrics*, 54(5), 430–438.

10 The Effects of Anxiety and Depression on Your Physical Health. (2019). Advanced Psychiatry Associates. <https://advancedpsychiatryassociates.com/resources/blog/the-effects-of-anxiety-and-depression-on-your-physical-health/>

11 Yellin, A. T., Clare Duffy, Tal. (2020). These 5 charts show the pandemic's devastating effect on working women. CNN. <https://www.cnn.com/2020/12/17/economy/job-losses-women-pandemic/index.html>

12 Van Ness, M. (2021). Covid-19 and women's mental health: The impact on wellbeing, disparities, and future implications. *Baylor University Community Connection Magazine*. <https://www.baylor.edu/communityconnection/news.php?action=story&story=222809>

13 Roy, K. (2022, September 6). More than a million women have left the workforce. The Fed needs to consider them as it defines 'full employment!' *Fortune*. <https://fortune.com/2022/09/06/women-workforce-fed-rates-consider-full-employment-katica-roy/>

Key Considerations for Funding Women and Girls' Mental Health

For funders committed to improving the lives of women and girls, it is important to integrate mental health and well-being support into areas such as employment, education, health, and more. The following questions are intended to be self-reflective to help you achieve greater impact across your portfolio by integrating support for mental health within current efforts related to improving outcomes in other issue areas.

How does addressing mental health achieve greater outcomes in your other focus areas related to women and girls' issues? What programs or organizations do you already support related to women and girls' education, health, and economic empowerment that could benefit from integrating a mental health focus?

How can your funding help to advance and build the evidence base around this type of integrative programming? How might support to existing grantees for research and evaluation build the field?

What philanthropic investment tools (e.g., advocacy, research, systems capacity building, direct services) might you employ to address integrating mental health with other program areas that you already support for women and girls?