

The Intersection between Mental Health and Reproductive Health: Challenges and Solutions for Achieving Holistic Well-being

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Abstract:

This study sheds light on the overlap between mental disorders and reproductive health, highlighting the key factors contributing to mental health issues related to sexual and reproductive health. The study concludes that the primary risk factors for mental illnesses include gender, sex, as well as the individual's social and economic status. It also reveals significant gaps in healthcare services across different regions and countries, with mental health not being given the utmost importance. Challenges such as a lack of facilities and mental health professionals were also identified. The study emphasizes the need for collaborative efforts from all stakeholders, whether governmental, individual, or community-based, to overcome the mental health crisis and achieve a qualitative leap in mental health for everyone.

Keywords: Reproductive Health ; Mental Health ; Mental Disorders.

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1.Introduction

Reproductive health is one of the most critical global health issues and an integral part of public health. In the early 1970s, it primarily concerned the age group of 15-49, focusing on family planning, contraception, and sexually transmitted diseases. However, after the 1994 International Conference on Population and Development held in Cairo, which marked a turning point, the concept of reproductive health expanded. It no longer limited itself to a specific age group or category but encompassed all individuals and all stages of life, from birth to old age. It also touched upon various dimensions, including health, social, and psychological aspects. Thus, reproductive health no longer merely signifies physical well-being and the absence of disease but has extended to include mental and psychological dimensions, which are among the most crucial aspects of sexual and reproductive health.

The world has recently been witnessing the dominance of non-communicable diseases, including mental disorders, which contribute to the rise in mortality and the global burden of diseases. More than 450 million people around the world suffer from mental and psychological disorders and substance abuse. According to most studies, the rates of disorders related to sexual and reproductive health in women are double those recorded in men (WHO-EM, 2011a). Recent reports have highlighted that the rates of mental health disorders in low and middle-income regions are much higher than those recorded in high-income countries, with a lack of and poor quality of services provided, especially for women, children, and adolescents, which poses a risk to their lives. Additionally, there is a significant gap between the demand for treatment and what is actually provided. From this standpoint, this study aims to highlight some of the intertwined aspects and the relationship between reproductive health and mental health, as well as some risk factors. It will also touch upon the developmental goals set to promote mental health in line with the Sustainable Development Goals for 2030.

2. Research Objectives

- Shed light on some determinants of sexual and reproductive mental health.
- Identify trends in some mental and psychological disorders related to sexual and reproductive health.
- Highlight some of the challenges facing mental health.
- Identify developmental plans and future goals for mental health.

3. Research Methodology

The descriptive-analytical approach was used to describe the prevailing and dominant psychological health conditions in the world and to analyze and interpret the causes and the relationship linking them to sexual and reproductive health.

4. Study Terminology

- **Health:** According to the World Health Organization (WHO), health is no longer defined merely as the absence of disease but extends to include physical, mental, and social well-being (WHO, n.d.).

- **Reproductive Health:** Reproductive health was defined at the International Conference on Population and Development held in Cairo in 1994 as: "Reproductive health is a state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being in all matters relating to the reproductive system and its functions and processes, and not merely the absence of disease or disability. Therefore, reproductive health means the ability of people to have a satisfying and safe sex life, the capability to reproduce, and the freedom to decide if, when, and how often to do so." This last condition implicitly includes the right of both men and women to know and use safe, effective, affordable, and acceptable family planning methods, and fertility regulation methods of their choice that do not conflict with the law, as well as the right to access appropriate healthcare services that enable women to safely pass through pregnancy and childbirth and provide couples with the best opportunities to have a healthy newborn (WHO, 2004).
- **Mental Health:** The World Health Organization (WHO: 2005) defined mental health as "a state of well-being in which the individual realizes his or her own abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to contribute to his or her community. It is not merely the absence of mental disorder. Mental health is a state of well-being that encompasses physical, mental, and social well-being." (Badawi, Dabar, 2023, 12)

According to Dardy Santor, "Mental health is a state of successful performance of mental functions, leading to productive activities, the establishment of relationships with others, the ability to adapt to changes, and the ability to face adversities. Mental health is indispensable for achieving personal and family well-being and even contributing to the local community." (Dardy Santor & others, 2009: 16)

From these definitions, it is evident that the concepts of health are interconnected and intertwined. The completeness of general health is linked to the completeness of physical and mental health. This definition includes sexual health, which is an integral part of general health. Thus, achieving health and well-being is only possible when both physical and mental health is complete. Mental health cannot be achieved unless the body is free from diseases, highlighting the close and integrated relationship between mental and reproductive health, as each influences and is influenced by the other.

5. Characteristics of an Individual with Good Mental Health

A person with good mental health is characterized by several traits that a person suffering from a mental illness or disorder lacks. The most important of these traits are: self and social adjustment, the ability to form relationships with those around them, whether in the family, school, workplace, or community, a desire for life, optimism, and the ability to bear the responsibility related to their actions and decisions (Jawhari and Salam, 2023), feeling happy with oneself and with others, self-actualization, and the ability to face daily problems and life demands rationally, psychological and functional integration, normal behavior and good manners with self-esteem, a sense of psychological security and inner peace, and the ability to adapt to the living environment without succumbing to it (Maamoun et al., 2023). (Maamoun et al., 2023)

This study will focus on mental health related to reproductive health, with a particular emphasis on women, as they are more exposed to reproductive health risks.

7. Mental Disorders: Determinants of Reproductive Mental Health

In 2019, more than 970 million people, both male and female and of various ages, lived with mental illnesses and disorders, which is approximately 13% of the world's total population. Mental illnesses vary and differ according to the individual's personal, social, and economic circumstances.

According to the following figure (Prevalence Rates of Mental Disorders), anxiety disorders are the most prevalent at 33%, followed by depressive disorders at 31%. Although cases of schizophrenia and bipolar disorders are not very common, they pose a concern for mental health services as they affect more than 24 million adults with schizophrenia, which is considered one of the most severe cases in its acute stages, and 40 million adults worldwide with bipolar disorders. (WHO, 2022)

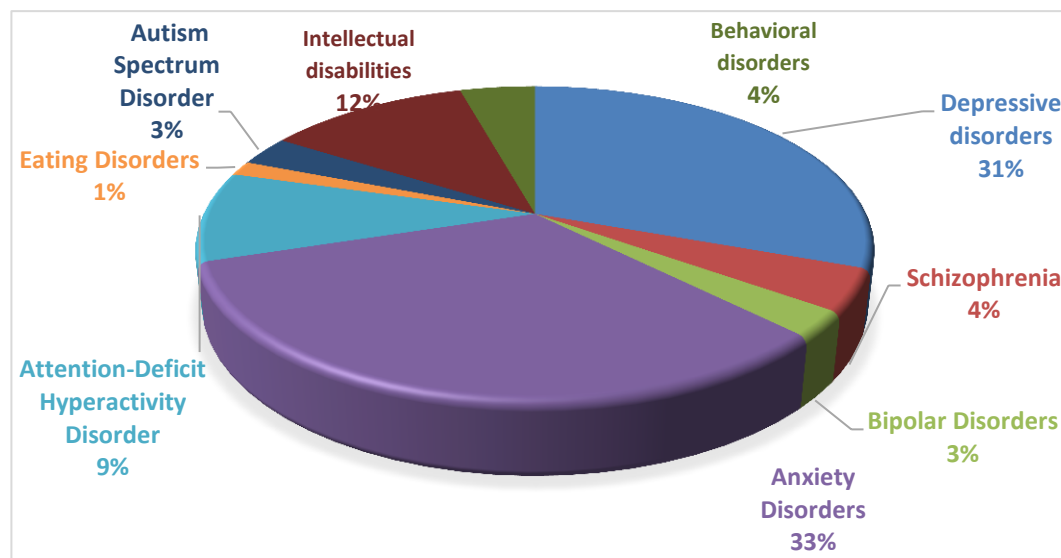
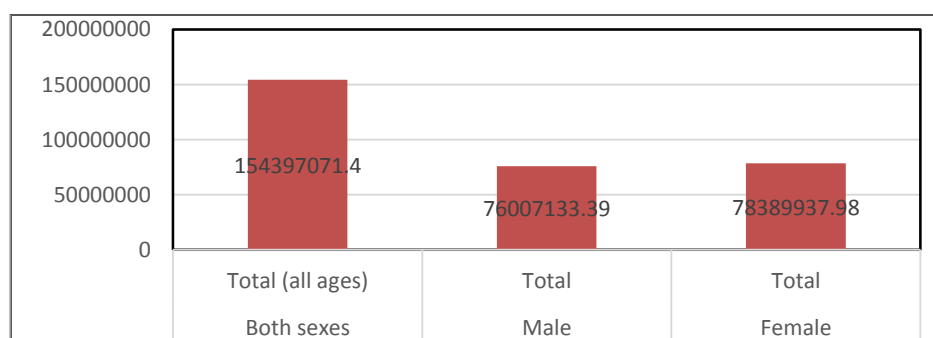


Figure: Rates of Mental Disorders

Source: Created by Al-Baha based on data from the World Health Organization's mental health report.:World mental health report: transforming mental health for all <https://iris.who.int/bitstream/handle/10665/356119/9789240049338-eng.pdf?sequence=1>

a) Gender Differences:

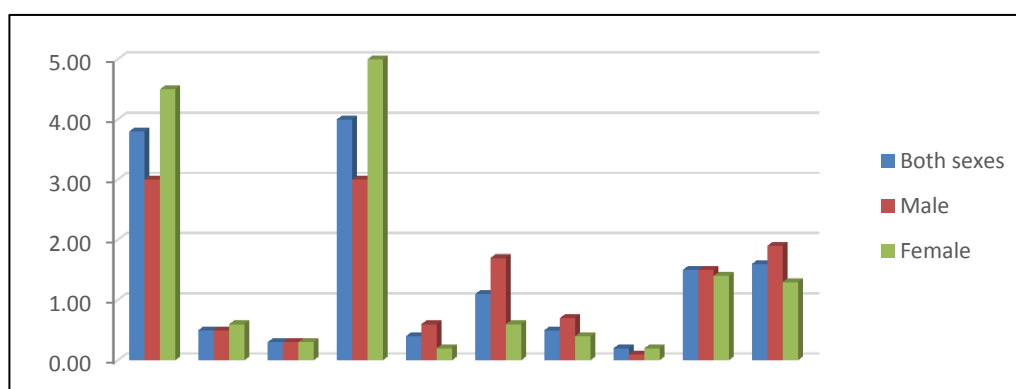
Gender differences are considered among the most important determinants of mental health that relate to individual characteristics, as they are factors that determine an individual's health status and their susceptibility to diseases and disorders (Department of Mental Substance Dependence Health and WHO, s.d.).



Source: Accomplished by the researcher with the assistance of the World Health Organization's disease burden estimates from the "Global Health Estimates" in 2019 <https://www.who.int/data/gho/data/themes/mortality-and-global-health-estimates>

The graph shows that the number of mental disorder cases is relatively similar between genders, but women dominate the prevalence rates at 52% compared to 47% for men (WHO, 2022a).

Figure: Estimates of Depressive Disorders by Gender



Source: Accomplished by the researcher with the assistance of the World Health Organization's disease burden estimates from the "Global Health Estimates" in 2019 <https://www.who.int/data/gho/data/themes/mortality-and-global-health-estimates>

The figure also shows that severe depression is more prevalent among women than men. According to the World Health Organization's (WHO) estimate for 2019, the number of women suffering from severe depression was 28,253,895 compared to 18,104,836 men. From the same figure, we observe that there are no significant differences between genders in the number of individuals affected by bipolar disorder and schizophrenia, which affect a small percentage of individuals, not exceeding 2%. (WHO, 2019)

Additionally, the number of women suffering from persistent depression exceeds that of men, and studies have shown that gender-specific risk factors include gender inequality, gender-based violence, poverty, and social and economic deprivation, among others.

b) Gender Inequality:

Gender inequality is considered one of the most important risk factors that lead to sexual reproductive and mental health disorders

The World Health Organization acknowledged in its 1998 report on mental health that women's health is closely linked to their social status. According to reports from the same organization, most mental disorders in women, especially among pregnant women,

are more prevalent in areas and environments where women have less freedom and where gender inequality is clearly dominant (USAID & momentum., 2022).

c) Gender-Based Violence:

Sexual violence, especially violence against women, is considered one of the most significant global health issues that societies and countries face, as it is one of the most egregious violations of women's human rights. Among the phenomena that countries and governments incur high costs from and strive to stop and combat, despite all efforts to address it, the phenomenon continues to spread widely on a global scale. More than 35% of women worldwide experience some form of violence in their lives (UN WOMEN, 2019), with varying prevalence rates across different regions. Violence takes various forms, such as honor crimes, sexual violence, rape, forced and early marriage, female genital mutilation, intimate partner violence, and human trafficking (WHO, s.d.). Intimate partner violence is one of the most prevalent types, affecting over 641 million women worldwide (WHO, 2021b).

A report by the World Health Organization, in partnership with the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine and the African Research Council, indicated that intimate partner violence or non-partner sexual violence negatively affects women's physical, mental, sexual, and reproductive health. It can lead to various complications and health problems, both physical and psychological, which may even result in death or suicide. Additionally, it adversely affects the health of their children, with a 16% chance of giving birth to an underweight baby or experiencing a miscarriage, and a 41% chance of preterm birth.

And the likelihood of them suffering from depression can double, and in some areas, it leads to them contracting HIV at a rate 1.5 times higher compared to women who have not been subjected to violence. The same source added that women who have been sexually assaulted have a 2.3 times higher likelihood of alcohol use disorders and a 2.6 times higher likelihood of suffering from depression or anxiety (WHO et al., 2013)

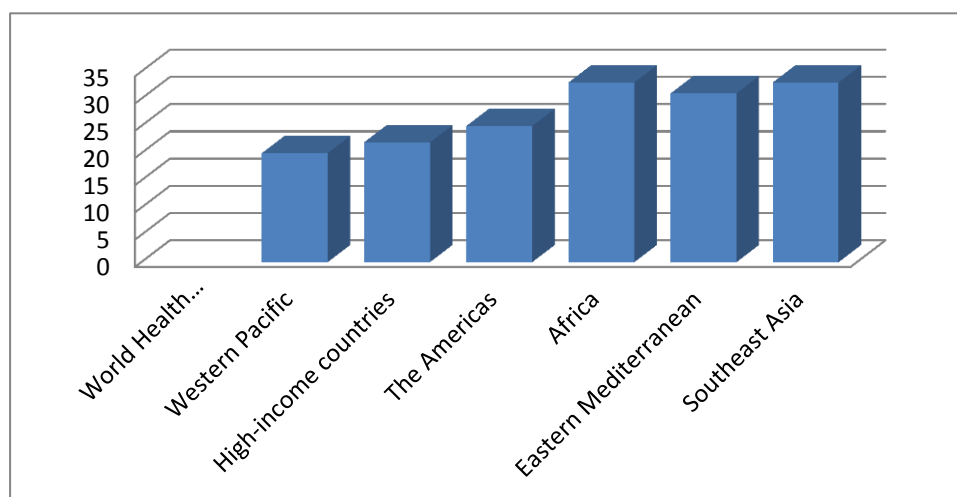


Figure: World Health Organization Estimates of Intimate Partner Violence for 2018

Source: Accomplished by the researcher based on information from the World Health Organization - <https://www.who.int/ar/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/violence-against-women>

As the World Health Organization estimates indicate, the rates of violence against women vary from one geographical area to another and also differ from one region to

another. According to the graph, we observe that the highest rates of prevalence are in low and middle-income regions such as Africa and Southeast Asia. This variation and difference in rates indicate the possibility of addressing and combating the phenomenon.

d) The Impact of Sexual and Reproductive Health on Mental Health across Different Life Stages

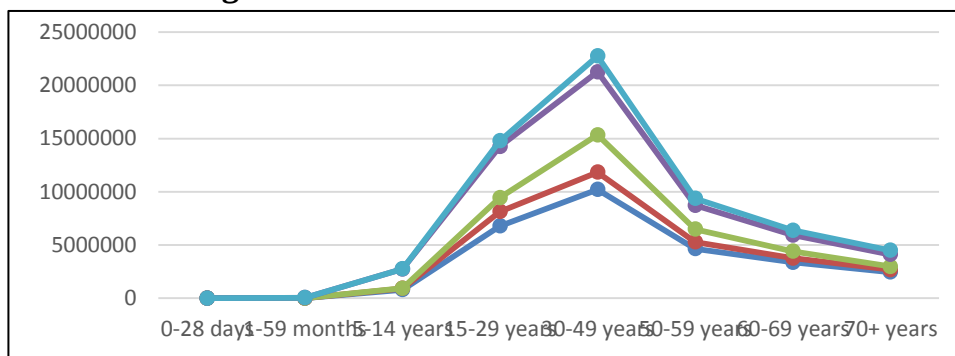


Figure: Mental and Psychological Disorders in Females

Schizophrenia-Depressive Disorders
Anxiety Disorders Bipolar Disorders
Other mental and behavioral disorders

The prevalence of mental disorders varies across different life stages.

• Childhood:

Childhood is considered one of the most sensitive stages: exposure to any form of violence during this stage can cause severe psychological disorders and leave lasting effects and repercussions on the child's personality in the future, potentially leading to permanent psychological disabilities. Despite the sensitivity of this stage, more than half of the world's children are exposed to various forms of violence annually.

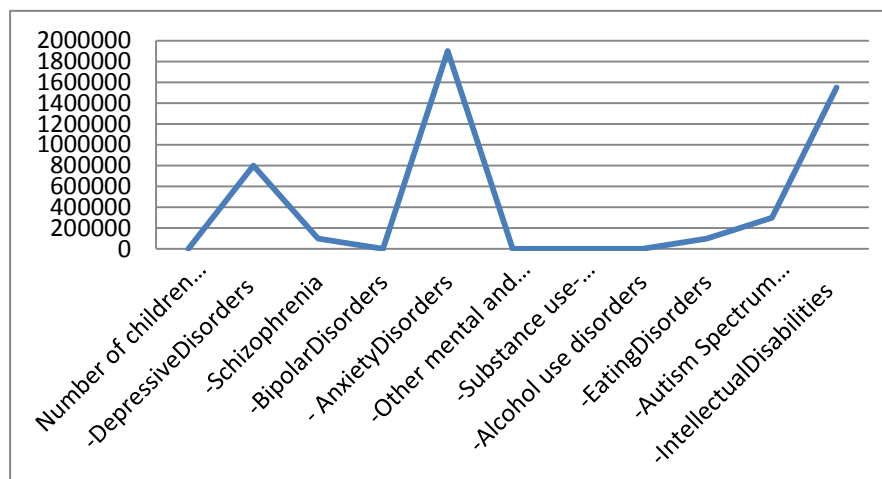


Figure: Number of children affected by mental and psychological disorders in 2019

Source: Health estimates from the World Health Organization

<https://www.who.int/data/gho/data/themes/mortality-and-global-health-estimates>

The World Health Organization reported indicated in 2001 that more than 20% of children and adolescents worldwide suffer from mental illnesses, including intellectual disorders, hyperactivity disorders, epilepsy, depressive disorders, substance abuse, and

others. According to the WHO's estimates for 2019, depressive disorders topped the list of psychological disorders among children, followed by intellectual disabilities and depressive disorders.

- **Adolescence**

The adolescent stage is considered one of the most important stages of growth that an individual goes through, and the changes that adolescents experience during this stage require special attention at all levels.

Most teenagers aged 13 to 19 undergo several physical and hormonal changes that can cause psychological conditions, which may be violent and aggressive for some. According to a report by the World Health Organization, most girls in this stage suffer from anxiety, depression, and feelings of insecurity and lack of belonging more than boys, which is evident in their stronger emotional reactions. Additionally, teenagers in this stage may experience psychological disorders due to a lower sense of self-worth. (Ilajnafsy, 2024)

On the other hand, with the liberation that the world is witnessing now, the phenomenon of early entry into sexual relationships and high-risk sexual behaviors among adolescents has become common in most societies. The lack of adequate attention to the specific needs of this group and the absence of proper health education make them susceptible to the risks of contracting sexually transmitted diseases such as AIDS, early pregnancy, unsafe abortion, and even death for girls. It also increases their likelihood of developing psychological and mental disorders.

- **Adulthood**

These stages are considered some of the most dangerous phases that may increase the likelihood of experiencing psychological crises. This is due to various experiences and events that a person may go through, such as relationships, pregnancy, and miscarriage, among others. Among the most significant milestones that may impact the reproductive and overall health of individuals, especially women, is pregnancy and the surrounding stages, which are accompanied by several physical and hormonal changes in women. These changes lead to psychological alterations, with the most severe being in the early and late stages of pregnancy. In the early weeks of pregnancy, women experience hormonal and physical changes, in addition to nausea and vomiting, which may increase anxiety and depression, especially in cases of unplanned or unwanted pregnancies. In the final weeks of pregnancy, a woman may experience intense fear and anxiety due to the fear of childbirth and its risks to her health or the health of her newborn (Dr. Ahmed Fahimjaber 2017)

The Reproductive Health Organization indicated in its report on the mental health of mothers, children, and adolescents that the prevalence of psychological disorders surrounding childbirth (before and up to one year after childbirth) ranges between 10% and 15%, predominantly consisting of depression cases followed by anxiety disorders. Additionally, depression cases may persist in about 30% of women. Suicide cases among women who have given birth account for 10% to 20% of deaths in various countries worldwide. Furthermore, various diagnostic studies have shown that 68% of women suffer from mental disorders related to childbirth.

- **Postpartum Depression:**

A Psychological condition resulting from severe depression that affects women within the first two weeks after childbirth; this type of depression is a common health issue, affecting more than one in ten women annually. Without timely intervention and treatment, the condition may worsen.

The main symptoms include persistent fatigue, weakness, frustration, crying, tension, anxiety, irritability, sadness, hopelessness, mood swings, and loss of interest in enjoyment, indifference, and apathy. The patient may also experience frightening and obsessive thoughts about harming the baby or herself, feelings of guilt, and a desire to withdraw. They may also suffer from memory problems and an inability to make decisions (Postnatal Depression, 2021). The primary causes of postpartum depression may include a sudden drop in the high levels of estrogen and progesterone, which return to normal levels immediately after childbirth, or a decrease in thyroid hormone levels, as well as feelings of fatigue, exhaustion, and stress, especially among new mothers.

- **Postpartum Psychosis:**

This severe psychological disorder affects one in every 500 women who have given birth. It may occur within the first two weeks after delivery and can lead the mother to kill her baby or commit suicide (Dr. Ahmed Fahimjaber, 2017).

- **Abortion:**

"Abortion is the condition of pregnancy before its time, meaning before the natural due date, or the act of a woman terminating her pregnancy either by her own action or by the action of another, by any means whatsoever" (Madawi, 2023, p. 72).

More than 20% of women experience a miscarriage in the early weeks of their pregnancy, and half of them suffer from depression, especially in cases of repeated miscarriages and inability to complete the pregnancy (Dr. Ahmed Fahimjaber, 2017).

- **Aging:**

The world has recently witnessed a significant increase in the number of elderly people. In 2020, nearly one billion elderly individuals over the age of sixty were counted (WHO, 2023). More than 14% of them live with psychological disorders, with most being elderly women at a rate of 14.2%, and 11.7% being men aged 70 or older (WHO, 2022a). Additionally, a quarter of all suicide deaths occur in this age group.

Some elderly individuals, especially men, may exhibit strange behaviors due to the sexual impotence they suffer from, or they may develop severe depression due to the death of one spouse, a divorce, or the belief that they have become a burden on others. (Hosseini, 2024)

- **Death and Suicide:**

In 2010, more than 4 million deaths were recorded due to mental illness or disorders, including 2.2 million from severe depression, 11.3 million from bipolar disorder, and approximately 700,000 from schizophrenia (WHO, 2022a)

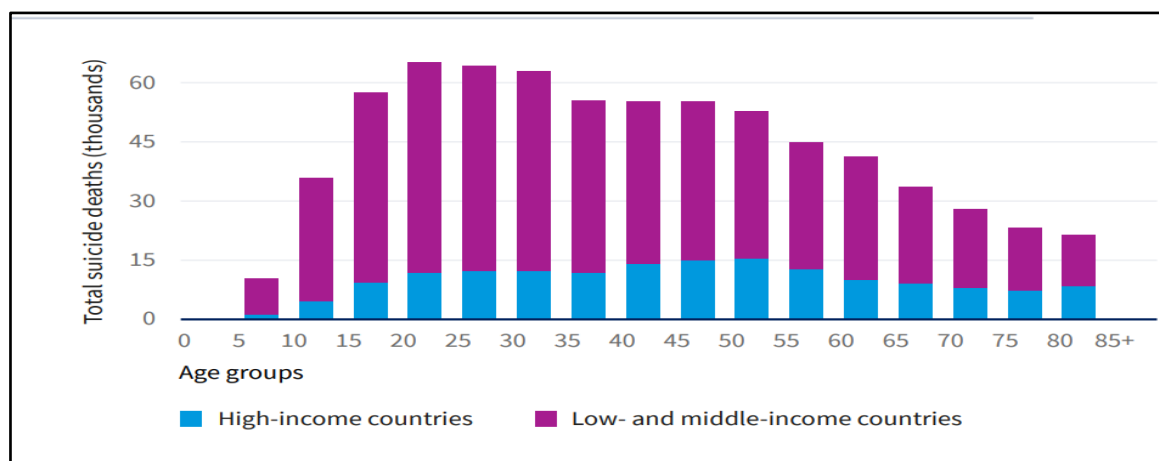


Figure: Total Suicide-Related Deaths in 2019

Source: World Health Organization report: World Mental Health Report: Transforming Mental Health for all, 2019.

<https://iris.who.int/bitstream/handle/10665/356119/9789240049338-eng.pdf?sequence=1>

Despite the recorded decrease in the suicide rate, estimated at 36% compared to the year 2000, with one case for every 100 deaths, it remains the leading cause of death among young people. However, in 2019, there was a significant increase in the number of suicide cases, reaching 703,000 deaths of various ages, with 58% of them being under 50 years old. Additionally, the highest suicide rates were recorded in the youth categories.

7. Challenges of health and mental health related to reproductive health

Mental health faces several obstacles and challenges that hinder the achievement of psychological well-being. Among the most significant challenges are:

- All countries around the world, especially low- and middle-income countries, suffer from a shortage of human resources, structures, and facilities dedicated to health. The World Health Organization, in its report on the comprehensive mental health action plan, pointed out a significant gap between the need for treatment and the availability of resources allocated for it, such as the lack of necessary structures to meet mental health needs and the misuse of existing ones (WHO, 2021a).

Num ber of Beds Dedicated to Mental Health per 100,000 People	Low- Income Countries	Low- r-Middle- Income Countries	Upper- r-Middle- Income Countries	High- Income Countries	Total
Beds in Psychiatric Hospitals	0.2	1.4	4.8	4.3	1
Beds in General Hospitals	0.4	0.1	0.6	1.2	0.2
Total Mental Health Beds	0.2	1.6	7.5	7	1.7

There are approximately 1.48 million beds dedicated to mental and psychological disorders worldwide, but they are unevenly distributed. In 39% of countries, there is less than one psychiatric bed per 100,000 people, with 85% of these being low-income countries. The number of psychiatric beds per 100,000 people is 0.2 for low-income countries, 1.6 for lower-middle-income countries, 7.5 for upper-middle-income countries, and 7 for high-income countries. Globally, 72% of these beds are found in psychiatric hospitals and facilities, while general hospitals and public health facilities lack beds specifically designated for mental and psychological disorder

- In addition to its lack of specialized mental health professionals and the unequal distribution among different regions.

Table: Number of professional workers specialized in the field of mental health in countries by income

Profes sional workers per 100,000	Low- income countries	Coun tries with lower middle income	Coun tries with higher middle income	High- income countries	The Total
Psychi atrists	1	1	7.2	9.2	1.5
Psychi atric nurses	0.2	1.1	5.3	31.8	2.2
Psych ologists	0.04	0.6	1.8	11	0.7
Social psychologists	0	0	2	18	0

According to the WHO's World Mental Health Report, the average number of psychiatrists per 100,000 people ranges from 0.1 in low-income countries to 9.2 in high-income countries. Additionally, two-thirds of low-income countries have less than one psychiatrist per 100,000 people. The number of psychiatric nurses ranges from 0.2 in low-income countries to 31.8 in high-income countries. The number of psychologists in the field of mental health per 100,000 people ranges from 0.4 in poor countries to 11% in developed countries. The percentage of countries with less than one psychologist per 100,000 people is 67%. The percentage of low-income countries with less than one social worker per 100,000 people is about 66%, compared to 4% in middle and high-income countries (SAXENA et al., 2006).

- There is a significant gap in the services provided and dedicated to mothers, children, caregivers, and even youth, along with a weak level of coverage (WHO-EM, 2011b).
- The lack of sufficient budgets for mental health spending, with the annual expenditure per person estimated at 2 US dollars globally and 0.25 dollars in poor countries per person worldwide

Table: Budgets Allocated for Mental Health by Income

The budget financing	Low-income countries	Countries with lower middle income	Countries with upper-middle income	High-income countries	The Total
The percentage of the budget allocated to mental health from the public health budget %	1	2.1	3	8.6	2.5

According to our observations, all countries in the world allocate budgets for mental health, but at limited rates. The percentage of the budget allocated to mental health worldwide is 2.5%. Low-income countries allocate very weak budgets for mental health, estimated at 1% of the total budget allocated for public health spending. This causes them to bear the greatest burdens and losses resulting from mental health issues. As for high-income countries, they allocate 6.8% of their total health budget to mental health. Although this is higher compared to other countries, it remains insufficient.

- It also indicated that between 76% to 85% of patients in poor countries do not receive treatment compared to 30% to 50% in high-income countries, in addition to the low quality of services provided (WHO, 2021a)

Social Stigma and Cultural Religious Beliefs

Social stigma, beliefs, and cultures among individuals, families, and communities remain among the main challenges that hinder the advancement of mental health, especially for women, children and adolescents

Stigma and misconceptions prevent many people with mental illnesses and psychological disorders from disclosing their health problems or seeking help, which hinders effective interventions and reduces their impact.

Mental Health Development Plans

Interest in mental health was not recent but dates back to ancient times. However, the developments the world has witnessed, especially those related to population growth, have led to a significant and concerning increase in the number of people. This growth has brought several challenges in various fields, particularly health. It has become necessary to double efforts to address health issues. Initially, countries and governments focused on health, but they concentrated on physical safety while neglecting the psychological and mental aspects. Most countries suffered several losses due to this neglect. This formed the basis for the ten recommendations in the 2001 World Health

Report, which represented the World Health Organization's vision for improving mental health systems to reduce the burden of mental disorders. These recommendations are:

- 1) Providing treatment in primary care
- 2) Providing psychiatric medications
- 3) Providing community care
- 4) Educating the public
- 5) Engaging communities, families, and consumers
- 6) Establishing national policies, programs, and legislation
- 7) Developing human resources
- 8) Linking with other sectors
- 9) Monitoring community mental health
- 10) Supporting more research

Conclusion

To achieve well-being in sexual and reproductive health, it is essential to pay attention to the psychological health aspect of all individuals, especially women, children, adolescents, and youth. It is clear that neglecting this aspect imposes a significant burden at all levels. Despite the efforts made by countries and governments to improve sexual and reproductive health, the psychological health aspect has been overlooked, not taken seriously, and not prioritized in almost all parts of the world, even though psychological care does not require advanced technologies or equipment.

All research and studies in this field indicate a significant gap between mental health status and needs, as the available resources are far from sufficient to provide the necessary care. The disparities between countries are particularly evident and large, especially in low-income and developing nations. To address this situation and align mental health with the goals of sustainable development, the World Health Organization has made several recommendations aimed at improving mental health services to assist countries in achieving their development goals and reducing the burdens resulting from mental and psychological disorders. Among the most prominent recommendations are: integrating mental health into primary healthcare, ensuring the provision of necessary resources such as medications, infrastructure, and personnel to bridge existing gaps and deliver services to all patients; prioritizing the establishment of national policies where mental health is a key focus; linking mental health with other sectors and promoting social services through the active involvement of individuals, families, and communities; raising awareness and providing mental health education to overcome social stigma; and finally, encouraging research in this field to obtain more data that will aid in the advancement of mental health care.

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