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MENTAL HEALTH PATTERNS OF ASSAMESE WOMEN AND ITS IMPACT IN SOCIETY

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ABSTRACT

Mental health is a fundamental aspect of social well-being and development. Women are more at risk for mental health issues due to biological, social, economic and cultural reasons. In Assam, women deal with more issues like poverty, domestic violence, flood-induced displacement and lack of adequate healthcare facilities. Despite the increasing prevalence of depression, stress, anxiety at various levels of the society, mental health remains neglected, more specifically in case of women. This paper attempts to examine the significance of mental health of women, the barriers of seeking medical help, analyzing the role of family in this regard, and how this issue can be dealt with.

Keywords: Mental Health, Women, Assam, Medical Help, Family.

INTRODUCTION

The World Health Organization defines mental health as "a state of mental well-being that enables people to cope with the stresses of life, realize their abilities, learn well and work well, and contribute to their community" (WHO, 2022). Therefore, mental health is not merely the absence of illness but a requirement for social well-being.

Women are more likely than men to experience depression, anxiety disorders, and psychological distress because of gender-based inequalities, caregiving responsibilities and social discrimination (Patel et al., 2018). In Assam, these issues are intensified by socio-economic hardships, natural disasters and limited access to healthcare facilities especially in case of mental health issues.

OBJECTIVE

This paper attempts to examine the mental health status of women in Assam from socio-cultural perspective. The objectives are –

1. To examine the significance of mental health
2. To identify the factors which prevent women from seeking professional help
3. To analyze the role of family members
4. To understand the importance of psychological counselling and psychiatric treatment
5. To suggest measures for improving women's mental health

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The method of study is primarily descriptive and analytical. A qualitative approach is adopted based on secondary data. Data has been collected from different sources like scholarly articles, books, government reports, reports of World Health Organization (WHO) and National Mental Health Survey of India.

SIGNIFICANCE OF MENTAL HEALTH

Mental health is central to overall health and quality of life. According to WHO (2022), "there is no health without mental health." A sound mental health enables women to manage stresses of daily life, build healthy relationships, participate in all aspects of life and contribute positively to the welfare of the family and the society.

Amartya Sen (1999) argues that development should be understood as the expansion of human capabilities. Mental well-being is one such capability that allows women to exercise autonomy and participate wholly in social life. Women suffering from mental health issues often find it difficult to participate in social activities like education, employment, parenting and community engagements.

Research shows that depression, stress and anxiety significantly affect women's productivity and physical health (Patel et al., 2018). In Assam, women face economic and social pressures that influence their psychological well-being in a negative way.

WHY WOMEN ARE LESS INTERESTED IN SEEKING MEDICAL HELP

Women usually hesitate to seek professional help though confronted with severe psychological distress. Erving Goffman (1963) defines stigma as an attribute that is deeply discrediting and reduces an individual "from a whole and usual person to a tainted, discounted one". Mental health issues or mental disorders carry strong social stigma in all levels of Assamese society. Moreover, women are either encouraged or pressurized to prioritize family responsibilities over personal health, and more specifically mental health. The question of the well-being of a woman always gets restricted. Some women, due to their lack of awareness about mental health, interpret symptoms of mental illness as normal emotional reactions which do not require professional attention. Another major factor that limits women's access to healthcare is the financial dependency on family members. According to Sen (1999), lack of economic freedom often translates into reduced access to health services. Some women fear that taking psychiatric treatment negatively affect marriage prospect or family reputation.

ROLE OF FAMILY MEMBERS IN COMBATTING MENTAL HEALTH ISSUES OF WOMEN

A women can recover completely from mental illnesses if they get proper support from family. According to the family systems theory of Bowen (1978), individual well-being is deeply connected to family relationships. When families recognize mental health problems and provide emotional support, significant changes in the mental health of a women are noticed and treatment becomes easier. Family members also have a major role in reducing social isolation. They should observe whether the person seeking medical help are following the prescribed medication and lifestyle changes. However, sometimes the family members do not recognize the severity of the problem and treats the woman as emotionally or mentally weak. This kind of attitude can delay treatment and make suffering as well as treatment longer. Acceptance and empathy are essential for recovery in such cases.

PSYCHOLOGICAL HELP AND PSYCHIATRIC TREATMENT

Mental illness affects not only the individual but also family members and society at large. Women as caregivers often experience stress, anxiety and emotional exhaustion. Proper education about psychological illnesses and counselling helps both the family members and the suffering women. The American Psychological Association (2023) emphasizes that family involvement improves treatment adherence and long-term recovery outcomes. When there is a supportive family, patients have reduced misconceptions about mental illness, communicate freely and easily and have sound emotional support with enhanced coping strategies. So, counselling for family members is an important part that cannot be ignored in the treatment of a mental patient. As Viktor Frankl (1959) noted, “An abnormal reaction to an abnormal situation is normal behavior”. Families can avoid blaming patients by understanding this principle.

CONTRIBUTION OF THE MENTAL HEALTH OF WOMEN TO THE SOCIETY

Social development is closely associated with the mental health or well-being of women at large. Women who are both physically and mentally healthy can contribute to the society from various dimensions. A healthy mother strongly influences the cognitive and emotional development of children (WHO, 2022). Economic development also depends on women as women constitute a significant portion of the workforce in agriculture, tea plantation, education, healthcare and many more sectors in Assam. Healthy women are more likely to participate in social activities. In this way they promote community development and take part in welfare activities.

As Mahatma Gandhi stated, "If you educate a man, you educate an individual. But if you educate a woman, you educate an entire family." This statement explains the principle that in what way the health and well-being of a woman influence the society as a whole.

MEASURES FOR IMPROVING MENTAL HEALTH OF WOMEN

One of the major reasons of mental health issues of women in Assam is the lack of awareness. So, creating mental health awareness among people and organizing campaigns to remove myths is one way of fighting this situation. Another way is to gradually increase the number of professional working in this field like psychiatrist, psychologists and psychological counsellors particularly in rural areas. Moreover, specialized counselling services should be made more readily available for women undergoing domestic violence, tea garden workers, adolescent girls, elderly women and for victims of social discrimination. Self-help groups, NGOs and community development groups should take proper initiatives for such discussions.

CONCLUSION

In Assam, the mental health and well-being of women do not get appropriate attention. It remains an unexplored and critical public health issue. Social stigma, patriarchal norms, economic dependency and inadequate health care infrastructure are some of the reasons that prevent women from getting proper treatment at the proper time. Acceptance from family and the society as well as getting diagnosis and treatment, can help recovery and social adjustment.

The mental health and well-being of a women is not just a healthcare priority, it is the foundation upon which a society can grow.

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