



## Cause for Concern and Optimism: The Global State of Women's Mental Health

A Review of

*Women's Mental Health: Resistance and Resilience in Community and Society*

by Nazilla Khanlou and F. Beryl Pilkington (Eds.)

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Reviewed by

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It is stated in the introduction to *Women's Mental Health: Resistance and Resilience in Community and Society* that the World Health Organization (2000), after reviewing worldwide evidence on women's mental health, sees the need to shift the focus of the mental health profession from the individual to the environmental context in which women find themselves as these contexts have the greatest impact on women's health overall. The second critical point made at the outset pinpoints the multidisciplinary perspective taken by the editors. This complex perspective includes various research methodologies that add richness to the vast amount of data gathered in this volume for the reader. Women's individual voices and subjective experiences are adhered to while interweaving them within their relationships, communities, and societal contexts. So while the text serves as a useful reference source for current data on the global state of women's mental health, it contains added value as a result of the attention paid to lived experiences of women. But perhaps most important is the theme of the interaction of resistance and resilience that women themselves enact to protect their families and themselves, as well as to adapt to the profound changes and struggles they encounter in their daily lives. The focus on resistance and resilience highlights women's strengths and capacities even within the most traumatic and stressful of circumstances. Recognizing women's sources of resilience and resistance provides mental health professionals, policy makers, and administrators of public health and mental health services with useful tools for their work with and on behalf of these women. What could have been a daunting read given the large amount of data showing the extraordinary stresses and strains women are encountering turns out to be a resource for both useful information about how to help women and for encouragement or inspiration to implement solutions and strategies that take women's resilience into account.

The book is structured in six parts to highlight (1) structural determinants; (2) community and social support; (3) health and social services; (4) displacement, migration, and resettlement; (5) poverty and marginalization; and (6) motherhood and resilience. As stated above, the volume includes a vast amount of data that might have been

overwhelming for the reader and too cumbersome to utilize in clinical practice. However, by structuring the book according to the six domains, the editors have provided a text that shapes the data so that the reader can view it as relevant to clinical practice, administration, or policy making. With so much attention being paid currently to immigration crises in high-conflict zones around the globe, more and more mental health practitioners and policy makers will be confronted with both short- and long-term mental health impacts in diverse populations and circumstances. This text addresses a multiplicity of adverse effects accompanying migration, including access to resources, isolation, discrimination, and language barriers.

Some of the topics addressed in the text focus on areas that have received little or no attention in the past. For example, one chapter deals with mothering grieving children after the death of a sibling. Another chapter sheds light on Black mothers' resilience after experiencing loss as a result of gun violence. These are extremely critical issues for mental health professionals to have as much information and insight available to them as they encounter far too many of these women in their daily practices. And somewhat ironically, one chapter demonstrates that it is usually women who are providing the types of care in the health and mental health fields, which cause stress to the caretakers themselves. Each of these separate topic domains is taken up in the context of the various ways in which gender, socioeconomic status, and race intersect. Addressing *intersectionality* provides mental health professionals with the complex perspective that is required if effective work is to be done within the everyday realities of women's lives (Hankivsky & Christoffersen, 2008).

Several of the chapters address the ways in which employment and poverty have an impact on the well-being of women. Within separate chapters, more specific factors such as women with disabilities, unpaid work, immigration, and employment are discussed. Stress is a constant theme running throughout the book. An important related insight involves mental health clinicians' tendency often to overlook economic and social factors. The danger in this oversight is to view stress exclusively as an intraindividual factor and to ignore the contextual circumstances, which themselves cause much of the stress. Each chapter includes responses and recommendations for solutions to the problems highlighted. Mental health practitioners come away with many insights for helping women seek out the services and the help they need. Examples of success are provided in the book. Readers will gain a vivid picture of the amount of distress, suffering, isolation, and trauma among women around the world, but they will also have a clearer idea of what can be done in practical and effective ways. It becomes clear from the book that the mental health profession has the knowledge and tools to support women. The range of problems, including those stemming from poverty, lack of paid work, domestic abuse, isolation from immigration, language barriers, and others, can be solved, no matter how severe or pervasive. What is required is the will and the ability to organize and implement the solutions that have been found to be effective, not to mention the continued creative problem solving that will result from having this significant source of data.

*Women's Mental Health* is an important resource for mental health professionals, policy makers, and mental and public health administrators. It provides a wealth of data, insight into women's lived experiences, culturally sensitive recommendations, and practical solutions to the range and variety of circumstances that have a profound and lasting impact on women and their families and communities.

## References

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