

A conceptual framework for Women's mental health and empowerment

FUNDED BY KATE SPADE NEW YORK AS PART OF THE
WOMEN AND GIRLS: EMPOWERMENT THROUGH MENTAL HEALTH REPORT





We extend our immense gratitude and acknowledgment to the research advisors who have provided valuable insights, guidance, and expertise for this research:

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Within current approaches to women's empowerment mental health does not have a clear role and has not been prioritized in research or practice¹.

Though researchers note that mental health and empowerment are closely aligned facets of a woman's life², it has not been extensively or rigorously studied or documented.

This framework seeks to show the essential mediating role that mental health plays in women's empowerment³.

In the analogy of this framework⁴, mental health is foundational to women's empowerment. It is the roots from which empowerment grows. Even though you can't see the roots of a flower, they are foundational to its growth. And, just like the flower, women's mental health needs nourishment as the foundation for her empowerment.

Growth towards empowerment is not possible without good mental health, and good mental health is difficult to achieve without empowerment.

Mental health is greatly shaped by social and economic determinants⁵ which can be conceptualized broadly as social inclusion, access to economic resources, education, and freedom from discrimination and violence⁶. These determinants nourish the soil and allow good mental health to take root.



Like lack of empowerment, these determinants are ultimately entrenched in social and economic realities⁷, and they often form virtuous (or vicious) cycles that enable women to change their circumstances (or keep them within them).

For the purposes of this framework, empowerment is defined as: the expansion of choice and the strengthening of voice through the transformation of power relations, so women have more control over their lives and futures³. This is simplified as **voice, choice, and power**.

¹ The Center for High Impact Philanthropy. (2017). *The XX Factor: A comprehensive framework for improving the lives of women and girls*, University of Pennsylvania. <https://www.impact.upenn.edu/toolkits/the-xx-factor/>

² Kermode, M., Herrman, H., Arole, R., White, J., Premkumar, R., & Patel, V. (2007). Empowerment of women and mental health promotion: a qualitative study in rural Maharashtra, India. *BMC public health*, 7(1), 1-10. <https://bmcpublichealth.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/1471-2458-7-225>

³ Van Eerdewijk, A. H. J. M., Wong, F., Vaast, C., Newton, J., Tyszler, M., & Pennington, A. (2017). White paper: A conceptual model on women and girls' empowerment. Amsterdam: Royal Tropical Institute (KIT). <https://repository.uibn.ru.nl/bitstream/handle/2066/169223/169223.pdf>

⁴ Jones, C. P. (2000). Levels of racism: a theoretic framework and a gardener's tale. *American journal of public health*, 90(8), 1212-1215. <https://www.health.state.mn.us/communities/practice/resources/equitylibrary/docs/jones-allegories.pdf>

⁵ World Health Organization & Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation. (2014). *Social determinants of mental health*, Geneva. https://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/handle/10665/112828/9789241506809_eng.pdf

⁶ Ibid. Kermode et al. (2007)

⁷ Ibid. World Health Organization & Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation. (2014)

A range of social, political, structural, and biological issues negatively impact a woman's mental health, particularly for women from systematically disadvantaged and marginalized communities⁸. This is further exacerbated by the converging crises taking place around the globe.



Women are at higher risk of mental disorders partly because of greater exposure and vulnerability to overt social and economic inequalities^{9,10}.

When mental health is not supported, or trauma occurs, women suffer¹¹, as there are no fertile grounds for seeds to take root. This can create a vicious cycle that it is difficult to recover from.

When risks and social determinants are addressed through promotion and prevention, mental health is valued, exposure to mental health risks is reduced, and collective and individual mental health improves^{12,13}.

Affordable, accessible, appropriate systems of mental health services¹⁴ are other effective tools for the recovery and treatment of mental illness.

Together, these approaches form a spectrum of mental health interventions that can nourish the soil and support the strong roots of mental health for women along their journey to empowerment and equality.

Utilizing the spectrum of mental health interventions nourishes the soil by supporting women's mental health. Good mental health can result in women developing more positive attitudes and mindsets about themselves^{15,16,17} and demonstrating healthier behaviors^{18,19,20}. These strong roots help empowerment to ultimately take seed.

Good mental health promotes greater control and agency and ultimately allows women to more fully participate in their lives across individual, community and societal levels (which in turn supports good mental health).

When women have the agency, resilience, and self-efficacy to fully participate in their lives, they develop self-esteem and confidence, critical prerequisites to empowerment^{21,22}.

This leads to the expansion of choice and the strengthening of voice through the transformation of power relations, so women have more control over their lives and futures²³.

Taking this approach to integrating mental health as foundational to women's empowerment results in more sustainable empowerment outcomes, particularly when undertaken at the community level.

In addition, just as a flower captures the nutrients it needs to strengthen its roots, there is a bidirectional relationship between women's empowerment and mental health. Increased empowerment drives improved mental health²⁴ which provides critical support to the right to good mental health for all women.



⁸ Health Equity and Policy Lab, University of Pennsylvania. Systematically Disadvantaged Populations, Areas and Facilities. <https://www.healthequityandpolicylab.com/underserved-populations-areas-and-facilities>
Systematically disadvantaged communities are those for which the social conditions in which people are born and live do not ensure opportunities for them to be healthy and to flourish. They are disproportionately affected by disease, dysfunction and ill-being. Underserved and marginalized populations include people who experience discrimination of any kind and encounter barriers (e.g., racial, ethnic, gender, sexual orientation, economic, cultural, and/or linguistic) to accessing public goods and services.
⁹ World Health Organization. (2001). *The World Health Report 2001: Mental health – new understanding, new hope*, Geneva. https://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/handle/10665/42390/WHR_2001.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y
¹⁰ Lund, C., Brooke-Sumner, C., Baingana, F., Baron, E. C., Breuer, E., Chandra, P., ... & Saxena, S. (2018). Social determinants of mental disorders and the Sustainable Development Goals: a systematic review of reviews. *The Lancet Psychiatry*, 5(4), 357-369. https://haushofer.ne.su.se/publications/Lund_et_al_LancetPsychiatry_2018.pdf
¹¹ World Health Organization. (2022). *World mental health report: transforming mental health for all*, Geneva. Licence: CC BY-NC-SA 3.0 IGO. <https://www.who.int/publications/item/9789240049338>
¹² Walker L, Verins I, Moodie R, Webster K. (2005). Responding to the social and economic determinants of mental health. In Herrman H, Saxena S, Moodie R. (Eds.), *Promoting Mental Health: concepts, emerging evidence, practice* (pp.89-106). World Health Organization, Geneva. https://personalevolutionllc.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/MH_Promotion_Book.pdf#page=110
¹³ Freeman, M. (2022). The World Mental Health Report: transforming mental health for all. *World Psychiatry*, 21(3), 391-392. <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/pdf/10.1002/wps.21018>
¹⁴ Saxena, S., & Setoya, Y. (2014). World Health Organization's Comprehensive Mental Health Action Plan 2013–2020 [Editorial]. *Psychiatry and Clinical Neurosciences*, 68(8), 585–586.

¹⁵ H Ibid. Kermode et al. (2007)
¹⁶ Walker L, Verins I, Moodie R, Webster K. (2005). Responding to the social and economic determinants of mental health. In Herrman H, Saxena S, Moodie R. (Eds.), *Promoting Mental Health: concepts, emerging evidence, practice* (pp.89-106). World Health Organization, Geneva. https://personalevolutionllc.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/MH_Promotion_Book.pdf#page=110
¹⁷ World Health Organization. Mental Health WHO web page: World Health Organization; 2022 [updated 2022/06/17]. Available from: <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/mental-health-strengthening-our-response>.
¹⁸ Ibid. World Health Organization. (2001)
¹⁹ Herrman H, Saxena S, Moodie R, Walker L: Promoting mental health as a public health priority. In Herrman H, Saxena S, Moodie R. (Eds.), *Promoting Mental Health: concepts, emerging evidence, practice* (pp. 2-17). World Health Organization, Geneva. https://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/handle/10665/43286/9241562943_eng.pdf?sequence=#page=23
²⁰ Newbigging, K. (2017). Mainstreaming gender equality to improve Women's Mental Health in England. In *The Psychology of Gender and Health* (pp. 343-361). Academic press.
²¹ Ibid. Newbigging, K. (2017)
²² ICRW. (2019). *Voice, Choice and Power - Evidence and recommendations for increasing girls' and young women's agency and decision-making through U.S. foreign assistance*. <https://www.icrw.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/Voice-Choice-and-Power.pdf>
²³ Ibid. Van Eerdewijk et al. (2017)
²⁴ Ibid. Kermode et al. (2007)

Supporting the roots of good mental health doesn't impact a single woman, it creates positive effects that support an enabling environment of good mental health and increased empowerment for all women. Incorporating mental health into women's empowerment interventions will help them have a more comprehensive and sustainable impact.

When women come together to share experiences and offer solidarity²⁵, this can shift the way they think of themselves and their place in society, further nourishing both empowerment and mental health. Being in a community (be it a school, or a workplace, or a family) that can provide mental health support is essential for positive mental health to take root²⁶ and leads to more sustainable empowerment results.



THEORY OF CHANGE

INPUTS: Integrating mental health into women's empowerment and equality frameworks and practice.

OUTPUTS: Through access to targeted programs and interventions, improvements are made to the conditions that affect women's lives.

OUTCOMES: Women develop more positive attitudes and mindsets about themselves and demonstrate healthier behaviors. They fully participate in their lives and, as a result, develop greater self-esteem and confidence.

IMPACT: By putting mental health at the foundation of empowerment, the ultimate impact is the sustainable expansion of choice and the strengthening of voice through the transformation of power relations, so women have more control over their lives and futures.



²⁵ Cornwall, A. (2016). Women's empowerment: What works?. *Journal of International Development*, 28(3), 342-359. <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/pdf/10.1002/jid.3210>

²⁶ Ibid. World Health Organization. (2022)

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