

Mental Health Issues Among Women: Implications for the Sustainability of the African Family

By

Associate Professor Uju Agomoh

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1. Introduction

The sustainability of the African family—a unit that embodies identity, culture, and continuity—depends significantly on the mental, emotional, and physical wellbeing of women. Women are the cornerstone of family life: caregivers, nurturers, leaders, and often, the silent bearers of intergenerational responsibilities. Yet, mental health issues among women remain one of the least discussed and least addressed challenges facing the African family and society today.

Mental health is not merely the absence of mental illness; it encompasses emotional stability, psychological resilience, and the capacity to cope with life's stresses productively. When a woman's mental health is compromised, the ripple effect is felt across families, communities, and generations.

2. Understanding Mental Health and Gender Dynamics

Globally, mental health disorders are a leading cause of disability, affecting one in every four people. However, women experience mental health challenges differently from men—both in prevalence and manifestation. Biological, sociocultural, and economic factors intersect to shape the mental health outcomes of women.

According to the World Health Organization (WHO):

- Women are twice as likely as men to experience depression and anxiety disorders.
- They are also more vulnerable to post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), particularly in contexts of violence, displacement, or abuse.
- Socioeconomic stressors, gender discrimination, and unequal access to healthcare further exacerbate these conditions.

In Africa, these global trends are intensified by the pressures of survival, cultural expectations, poverty, and the evolving dynamics of the modern family.

3. Common Mental Health Issues Affecting Women

a. Depression and Anxiety Disorders

These are the most common mental health challenges among women. Many African women face chronic stress from financial hardship, marital instability, unemployment, and the double burden of professional and domestic responsibilities. The stigma surrounding mental illness often prevents them from seeking help, leading to prolonged suffering.

b. Postpartum Depression

Childbirth, though joyous, can trigger profound emotional changes. Postpartum depression affects between 10–20% of new mothers, leading to sadness, withdrawal, and feelings of inadequacy. In African societies, where maternal roles are highly idealized, women often conceal their struggles, risking long-term psychological harm.

c. Gender-Based Violence and Trauma

Domestic violence, sexual assault, and harmful traditional practices (such as early marriage or female genital mutilation) have deep psychological consequences. Survivors often suffer from PTSD, depression, and chronic anxiety. Unfortunately, cultural silence and victim-blaming perpetuate these traumas.

d. Substance Use and Coping Disorders

An increasing number of women are turning to alcohol or prescription drugs to cope with stress, isolation, or abuse. These coping mechanisms mask deeper emotional pain and contribute to the breakdown of family stability.

e. Menopausal and Aging-Related Mental Health Challenges

Hormonal changes, social isolation, and reduced sense of purpose during menopause can trigger depression and anxiety. In cultures where older women face neglect or loss of social status, these emotional struggles intensify.

4. Social and Cultural Drivers of Women's Mental Health Problems

Several factors underpin the mental health challenges faced by African women:

1. **Gender Roles and Expectations** – Women are expected to be endlessly resilient and self-sacrificing, often at the cost of their wellbeing.
2. **Economic Insecurity** – Financial dependence and unemployment create feelings of helplessness.
3. **Patriarchal Pressures** – Disempowerment in decision-making, gender-based violence, and limited autonomy affect psychological health.
4. **Cultural Stigma** – Mental illness is often misinterpreted as spiritual weakness or moral failure, discouraging help-seeking.
5. **Family Instability** – Divorce, migration, and single parenthood increase the emotional burden on women.
6. **Conflict and Displacement** – Women in regions affected by insecurity or displacement face compounded trauma and limited access to mental health care.

5. Impact on the African Family

A woman's mental health directly affects the sustainability of the family. When women suffer in silence:

- Children's development is affected due to emotional neglect or inconsistent care.
- Marital relationships deteriorate under stress, sometimes leading to domestic violence or separation.
- Economic productivity within the home declines.
- Intergenerational cycles of trauma emerge, as children absorb and replicate unaddressed emotional distress.

Hence, protecting women's mental health is not just a personal issue—it is a family sustainability and nation-building priority.

6. The Global and Local Challenge

The global conversation on mental health has gained momentum, but Africa still faces serious gaps:

- Limited mental health infrastructure—few psychiatrists, psychologists, or counseling centers.
- Inadequate policy implementation despite frameworks like the WHO Mental Health Action Plan (2013–2030).
- Underfunding of women's mental health programs in national budgets.
- Weak integration of mental health into primary healthcare.

However, there are emerging efforts by governments, NGOs, and women's organizations—like Inner Wheel—to promote awareness, support, and advocacy for mental wellbeing.

7. Pathways to Sustainability: Addressing Women's Mental Health

To ensure the sustainability of the African family, we must build systems that recognize and respond to women's mental health needs. Some strategic actions include:

- a. Awareness and Education
 - Promote open conversations about mental health in communities, workplaces, and places of worship.
 - Train women leaders, health workers, and community volunteers to identify early signs of distress.
- b. Accessible and Affordable Mental Health Services

- Integrate mental health into primary healthcare and maternal health services.
 - Encourage community-based counseling, using local languages and culturally sensitive approaches.
- c. Legal and Policy Reforms
- Strengthen laws protecting women from gender-based violence.
 - Ensure enforcement of workplace mental health and maternity protection policies.
- d. Economic Empowerment
- Support women's entrepreneurship, access to credit, and vocational opportunities.
 - Financial independence is a major buffer against mental distress.
- e. Support Networks and Family Involvement
- Encourage family members, especially men, to share domestic and emotional responsibilities.
 - Promote peer support groups and mentoring among women.
- f. Role of Faith and Community Organizations: Faith-based and social groups like Inner Wheel have a vital role in bridging the gap between cultural beliefs and mental health advocacy—providing safe spaces, counseling, and hope for women in distress.
- g. Applying the PARCEL Code to the issue of Mental Health Among Women provides a practical and sustainable framework that connects personal empowerment, community systems, and social transformation.

Here is how each component of the PARCEL Code can be applied to promote women's mental health and the sustainability of the African family:

I. P – Partnership: (Collaboration across sectors to create an ecosystem of care.)

Application:

- Foster partnerships between government, civil society, faith-based organizations, mental health professionals, and women's groups. Example: Inner Wheel District 914 can partner with the Federal Ministry of Health and local Civil Society Organizations to host community mental health outreaches and mobile counseling clinics.

Sustainable Outcome: Builds a network of shared responsibility for women's wellbeing, ensuring that mental health is not isolated from social and economic development.

II. A – Apprenticeship: (Learning through mentorship, skill transfer, and empowerment.)

Application:

- Establish mentorship and life-skills programs where older, emotionally stable women mentor younger women on stress management, resilience, and balancing family responsibilities.
- Partner with mental health professionals to train “community wellness champions” who can identify early signs of distress and refer women for help.

Sustainable Outcome: Promotes continuity of wellness knowledge, reducing stigma and encouraging help-seeking behaviour across generations.

III. R – Relationship: (Building supportive, nurturing human connections.)

Application:

- Strengthen family and community relationships through communication, empathy, and trust-building workshops.
- Encourage marital and parenting counseling within faith communities and women’s associations.

Sustainable Outcome: Healthy relationships create emotional buffers against depression, anxiety, and isolation — vital for the sustainability of the family.

IV. C – Citizenship: (Promoting civic responsibility and social inclusion.)

Application:

- Advocate for the enforcement of mental health rights under Nigeria’s Mental Health Act (2021).
- Encourage women to engage in local governance and community development efforts that prioritize healthcare and mental wellbeing.

Sustainable Outcome: Builds a society where women are active participants in shaping systems that affect their health and families.

V. E – Entrepreneurship: (Economic empowerment as a foundation for psychological stability.)

Application:

- Support women with entrepreneurship training, microcredit access, and cooperative funding systems.
- Incorporate financial literacy and stress management training into women’s empowerment programs.

Sustainable Outcome: Reduces economic anxiety and dependence, two key triggers of mental distress, thereby strengthening family stability.

VI. L – Leadership: (Inspiring responsible, value-based influence.)

Application:

- Train women to become mental health advocates in their communities and institutions.
- Integrate emotional intelligence and servant leadership principles into women's leadership development.

Sustainable Outcome: Produces leaders who normalize conversations around mental health, influencing policy and cultural change.

VII. S – Stewardship: (Responsible management of life, resources, and influence.)

Application:

- Promote a culture where women see their mental and emotional wellbeing as a divine trust to be nurtured, not neglected.
- Encourage leaders and organizations to steward resources toward preventive mental health education, not just crisis response.

Sustainable Outcome: Embeds long-term accountability for women's mental health within community and institutional systems.

Note:

The PARCEL Code provides a holistic and sustainable approach to addressing women's mental health challenges. By integrating Partnership, Apprenticeship, Relationship, Citizenship, Entrepreneurship, Leadership, and Stewardship, communities can create an enabling environment where women flourish emotionally, socially, and economically — ensuring the sustainability of the African family in the face of global challenges.

8. Conclusion

The sustainability of the African family cannot be achieved without the mental wellbeing of women. When women thrive emotionally, families flourish; when women suffer silently, families weaken. Addressing mental health among women, therefore, is not merely a medical or social issue—it is a moral, cultural, and developmental imperative.

As the world faces global challenges—economic uncertainty, migration, conflict, and changing gender roles—Africa must prioritize women's mental health as a cornerstone for sustaining its families and securing its future.

9. Call to Action

Let governments, communities, faith groups, and organizations like Inner Wheel—commit to:

- Break the silence around mental health
- Build support systems that heal, empower, and sustain women; and
- Create a future where no woman suffers in silence.

Because when the mind of a woman is well, the family stands strong, and when the family stands strong, society endures.

Finally, I encourage you all to adopt the PARCEL CODE in dealing with this issue in a sustainable manner.

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