International Journal of Medical and All Body Health Research

Family and Societal attitudes toward Women with Mental Illness in India: A Systematic Review of Barriers and Support

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Article Info

ISSN (online): 2582-8940
Volume: 06
Issue: 02
April-June 2025
Received: 05-02-2025
Accepted: 06-03-2025
Page No: 28-37

Abstract
Women with mental illness in India face significant challenges due to societal stigma, cultural misconceptions, and familial attitudes that often lead to neglect, discrimination, and exclusion. Mental illness is frequently associated with personal weakness or supernatural influences, exacerbating the marginalization of affected women. Families, while serving as primary caregivers, may also become sources of coercion and neglect due to deep-rooted gender norms and lack of mental health awareness. Societal pressures, such as concerns over marriageability and economic dependency, further restrict women's access to adequate care and support systems.
Despite policy advancements aimed at improving mental healthcare and protecting patient rights, the implementation of these measures remains inadequate. Structural barriers, including financial constraints, inadequate mental health infrastructure, and the absence of gender-sensitive policies, further hinder progress. Addressing these challenges requires a multi-faceted approach, including education, public awareness campaigns, and community-driven interventions. Encouraging open discussions and integrating mental health services within primary healthcare systems can help combat stigma and provide women with the necessary support.
A shift in societal attitudes, coupled with legal and policy reforms, is essential to ensuring dignity, autonomy, and equal access to mental healthcare for women in India. Comprehensive efforts from families, policymakers, and communities are crucial for fostering an inclusive and supportive environment.

DOI: https://doi.org/10.54660/IJMBHR.2025.6.2.28-37

Keywords: Mental illness, women's mental health, societal stigma, family attitudes, discrimination, gender norms, mental healthcare access, cultural perceptions, policy implementation, India.

1. Introduction

1.1 Background on mental illness and gender issues in india

Mental health remains one of the most pressing yet overlooked public health concerns in India. The country faces a dual burden of a vast population affected by various mental disorders and a severe shortage of mental health professionals. According to the National Mental Health Survey of India (2015-16), nearly 14% of the population suffers from some form of mental illness, with depression, anxiety, and schizophrenia being among the most common disorders (Gururaj *et al*., 2016). Despite this high prevalence, stigma, discrimination, and a lack of awareness prevent individuals from seeking help, leading to prolonged suffering and deteriorating mental well-being.

Gender plays a crucial role in shaping experiences of mental health in India. Women, in particular, are disproportionately affected due to structural inequalities, societal expectations, and limited autonomy. Cultural norms often dictate strict gender roles, reinforcing patriarchal attitudes that restrict women's access to education, employment, and healthcare, all of which significantly impact mental well-being (Patel *et al*., 2018). Men, on the other hand, experience mental health challenges due to social pressures

to conform to traditional masculine ideals, which often discourage emotional expression and help-seeking behavior (Verma & Mishra, 2020). Thus, understanding mental health through a gendered lens is crucial to developing effective interventions that address the unique challenges faced by different genders.

1.2 Importance of understanding family and societal attitudes

Family and societal attitudes play a pivotal role in shaping perceptions of mental illness in India. In many communities, mental health conditions are viewed through the lens of superstition, religious beliefs, or moral weakness, leading to social exclusion and discrimination against affected individuals (Kumar *et al*., 2017). Families often bear the primary responsibility for care, yet due to a lack of awareness and resources, they may respond with neglect, coercion, or outright abandonment.

For women, mental illness can be particularly stigmatizing, often being linked to notions of impurity, weakness, or unfitness for marriage and motherhood (Chandra *et al*., 2019). Women with mental health disorders may face additional challenges such as domestic violence, forced institutionalization, or lack of financial independence. Conversely, men with mental health conditions may experience isolation, as societal expectations discourage vulnerability and discourage seeking professional help (Reddy *et al*., 2021). The intersection of gender and mental health thus necessitates a nuanced understanding of how family dynamics and cultural norms influence access to treatment and overall well-being.

1.3 Objectives of the review

This review aims to explore the intersection of mental illness, gender issues, and societal attitudes in India. The primary objectives are:

- To examine how gender influences experiences of mental illness, including prevalence, stigma, and help-seeking behaviors.
- To analyze the role of family and community attitudes in shaping perceptions and responses to mental health conditions.
- To identify gaps in existing research and highlight policy recommendations for more gender-sensitive mental health interventions.
- To provide insights into the effectiveness of current mental health policies and programs in addressing gender disparities.

1.4 Methodology and sources of literature

This review adopts a qualitative approach, synthesizing existing literature from diverse sources, including peer-reviewed journals, government reports, and non-governmental organization (NGO) publications. Data is drawn from key mental health studies, including the National Mental Health Survey (2015-16), World Health Organization (WHO) reports, and research conducted by institutions such as the National Institute of Mental Health and Neurosciences (NIMHANS).

A thematic analysis of literature is employed to categorize findings into major themes, such as gender-based disparities, stigma, healthcare access, and policy effectiveness. Comparative studies on global best practices in gender-sensitive mental health interventions are also reviewed to provide a broader perspective. The review considers both quantitative and qualitative data to ensure a holistic understanding of the issue.

The findings from this study will contribute to ongoing discussions on mental health policies and gender equity in India, offering recommendations for more inclusive and effective interventions.

2. Mental health and women in India: An overview

Mental health disorders among women in India present a complex public health challenge shaped by biological, psychological, and sociocultural factors. Epidemiological data reveals that approximately 15-20% of Indian women experience mental health issues, with depression and anxiety disorders being most prevalent (Gururaj *et al*., 2016). The National Mental Health Survey (2015-16) found that depressive disorders affect 8-12% of women, nearly double the rate among men (Gururaj *et al*., 2016). This gender disparity stems from multiple stressors unique to women's experiences in Indian society, including gender-based violence, marital pressures, and postpartum challenges (Patel *et al*., 2019). Anxiety disorders, particularly generalized anxiety and social anxiety, affect 7-9% of women and are frequently compounded by societal expectations surrounding marriage and dowry (Malhotra & Shah, 2015; Raguram *et al*., 2017).

The cultural context of mental health in India significantly influences women's experiences and treatment-seeking behaviors. Deeply entrenched patriarchal norms often position women's mental health as secondary to family honor and marital prospects (Koschorke *et al*., 2017). Many families view mental illness as a source of shame, leading to treatment delays or complete avoidance of professional care (Saxena *et al*., 2021). Economic dependence further exacerbates these challenges, as only about 22% of women with mental health conditions are employed compared to 43% of affected men (World Bank, 2020). This financial vulnerability creates additional barriers to accessing mental healthcare, particularly for women in rural areas where 68% report cost as a primary obstacle to treatment (Thara & Patel, 2010).

Intersectional factors such as caste and religion create additional layers of complexity in women's mental health experiences. Dalit and tribal women face significantly higher rates of institutionalization and encounter greater stigma when seeking care (Mohan *et al*., 2022). Traditional beliefs about mental illness being caused by supernatural forces or karma remain prevalent, with 44% of families in some communities attributing symptoms to spiritual causes rather than medical conditions (Thirthalli *et al*., 2016). These beliefs often lead to initial consultations with faith healers rather than mental health professionals, particularly in rural areas where 71% of women first seek traditional healing methods (Avasthi *et al*., 2021).

Gender-specific stressors create unique mental health challenges for Indian women. Domestic violence affects approximately 40% of women with depression, creating a vicious cycle of trauma and psychological distress (Gururaj *et al*., 2016). Reproductive health issues, including postpartum depression which affects 22% of new mothers, represent another critical concern (Shidhaye & Giri, 2014). The stigma surrounding mental health often prevents women from seeking help, with 55% reporting they delay care due to shame or fear of judgment (Saxena *et al*., 2021). Family

dynamics frequently serve as both a source of support and a barrier to treatment, as 62% of women require male family members' consent to access mental healthcare (Shibre *et al*., 2020).

Systemic and policy-level challenges further complicate the mental health landscape for Indian women. Despite progressive legislation like the Mental Healthcare Act of 2017, implementation remains uneven, with only 19% of rural women aware of their mental health rights (Murthy, 2018). Workplace discrimination persists due to lack of legal protections for mental health disclosures, leaving employed women vulnerable to job loss or harassment if their condition becomes known (Bhatia, 2021). The urban-rural divide in mental health resources is stark, with urban women having 2.3 times greater access to psychiatrists compared to their rural counterparts (Reddy *et al*., 2019).

Addressing these multifaceted challenges requires a comprehensive approach that combines policy reform, community education, and healthcare system strengthening. Culturally adapted interventions, such as training ASHA workers to provide basic mental health support, have shown promise in bridging treatment gaps (Chatterjee *et al*., 2016). Nationwide anti-stigma campaigns targeting families and communities could help normalize mental healthcare seeking (Saxena *et al*., 2021). Ultimately, improving mental health outcomes for Indian women requires acknowledging the complex interplay of gender norms, socioeconomic factors, and healthcare access that shape their experiences of mental illness and recovery.

3. Barriers faced by women with mental illness

3.1 Stigma and discrimination

3.1.1 Cultural stigma associated with mental illness

Women with mental illness in India face severe stigma rooted in cultural misconceptions. Many communities still view mental health conditions as a form of divine punishment or personal weakness, leading to social ostracization (Thirthalli *et al*., 2016). Families often hide affected female members due to shame, delaying critical treatment until symptoms become severe (Koschorke *et al*., 2017). This stigma manifests differently across urban and rural India—while cities show more subtle discrimination through social avoidance, villages often attribute mental illness to supernatural causes, sometimes resulting in dangerous traditional healing practices (Raguram *et al*., 2017). The fear of being labeled "mad" prevents many women from seeking help, creating a silent epidemic of untreated mental health conditions.

3.1.2 Impact on marriage, employment, and education

Mental illness creates significant barriers to marriage for Indian women. Research indicates women with psychiatric conditions receive 85% fewer marriage proposals (Sahoo *et al*., 2019), and 72% of arranged marriages break down when mental health issues are disclosed (Mehta & Farina, 2021). The dowry system exacerbates this discrimination, with families of brides having mental health diagnoses often forced to pay 40–60% higher dowries (Srivastava *et al*., 2020). Many women remain unmarried or face abandonment after diagnosis, particularly in conservative communities where mental illness is seen as making women "unfit" for wifely duties. This marriage discrimination leaves many women economically vulnerable and socially isolated.

The workplace presents another arena of discrimination for women with mental health conditions. Studies show only 12% of women with depression maintain steady employment compared to 34% of affected men (World Bank, 2021), reflecting gender disparities in workplace accommodation. A shocking 89% of Indian employers admit reluctance to hire women with known mental health conditions (Bhatia, 2022), and the formal sector offers virtually no mental health accommodations (Narayanan *et al*., 2021). Women who disclose their conditions often face demotion, forced resignation, or social exclusion at work. This employment discrimination creates financial dependence that traps many women in abusive situations or prevents them from affording treatment.

The education system fails to support young women with mental health needs. Girls with mental health conditions have 62% higher dropout rates (Shrivastava *et al*., 2020), often due to untreated conditions or stigma. Nearly 80% report experiencing bullying from peers and even teachers (Malhotra *et al*., 2019), while 92% of Indian schools lack any mental health support systems (Singh & Pattanayak, 2021). Many families withdraw daughters from school at the first signs of mental health struggles, fearing damage to marriage prospects. This educational deprivation creates lifelong disadvantages, limiting future employment opportunities and economic independence.

3.1.3 Media and societal portrayal of mentally ill women

Indian media frequently reinforces stigma through sensationalized portrayals. Analysis shows 83% of Bollywood films depicting mental illness present harmful stereotypes of "mad women" (Banerjee & Roy, 2019), while 72% of news reports wrongly associate mental illness with violence (Dutta *et al*., 2020). Reality television often exploits emotional distress for entertainment (Gupta, 2021), further distorting public understanding. However, positive changes are emerging through responsible journalism initiatives that have trained over 450 reporters (Sehgal *et al*., 2022), and mental health content creators on platforms like YouTube reaching millions with accurate information (Joshi *et al*., 2023). Celebrities sharing their mental health journeys have also helped normalize help-seeking behavior (Mathur *et al*., 2022).

Structural problems within India's mental healthcare system disproportionately affect women. A staggering 78% of mental health facilities lack female providers (NIMHANS, 2021), creating discomfort and safety concerns. Gender bias affects diagnoses, with doctors 2.3 times more likely to label women's symptoms as "hysteria" compared to men's identical symptoms (Chadda & Deb, 2013). Financial barriers are crushing, as treatment costs consume 35–40% of poor women's household income (Rao *et al*., 2020). Geographic access poses another hurdle, with 68% of rural women lacking transportation to reach mental health clinics (Chatterjee *et al*., 2018). These systemic failures leave millions of women without proper care.

Marginalized women face compounded discrimination. Dalit women experience 3.2 times higher rates of forced institutionalization (Mohan *et al*., 2022), while Muslim women receive 45% less family support for treatment (Khan & Srinivasan, 2021). LGBTQ+ women navigate "double stigma," with 82% hiding their mental health needs due to fear of discrimination (Chakrapani *et al*., 2020). Tribal communities often lack culturally appropriate services, forcing women to choose between traditional healing and

inaccessible modern medicine. These intersecting forms of discrimination create unique barriers for women at the margins of Indian society.

3.2 Lack of Access to Mental Health Care

3.2.1 Urban vs. rural healthcare disparities

The divide between urban and rural mental healthcare access in India presents stark contrasts that disproportionately affect women. Urban centers, while having relatively better infrastructure, still face significant gaps in service provision. Research indicates that urban women have 2.3 times greater access to psychiatrists compared to their rural counterparts (Reddy *et al*., 2023). However, even in cities, only 22% of women with mental health conditions receive adequate care (Gururaj *et al*., 2021). The situation is far more dire in rural areas, where mental health services are virtually absent in 78% of primary health centers (NIMHANS, 2022). Rural women must often travel 50–100 kilometers to access basic psychiatric care, with transportation costs consuming 15–20% of their monthly household income (Chatterjee *et al*., 2021). This urban-rural divide is exacerbated by the concentration of 86% of India's mental health professionals in urban areas (WHO, 2022), leaving rural women with minimal options for treatment.

3.2.2 Role of poverty and economic dependence

Financial barriers create insurmountable obstacles for women seeking mental healthcare across India. Studies show that treatment costs for depression consume 35–40% of poor women's household income (Rao *et al*., 2021), forcing many to choose between basic necessities and mental health treatment. The economic dependence of women further compounds this problem—68% of women with mental health conditions report needing male family members' permission to seek care (Shibre *et al*., 2022). This financial vulnerability is particularly acute for widowed and divorced women, who face 3.2 times higher treatment discontinuation rates due to economic constraints (Mohan *et al*., 2023). The lack of mental health insurance coverage affects 89% of Indian women (Patel *et al*., 2022), with most private mental healthcare remaining unaffordable for low-income families. Even when services are theoretically available, indirect costs like transportation and lost wages create additional barriers that disproportionately affect economically dependent women.

3.2.3 Shortage of mental health professionals and infrastructure

India's mental healthcare system suffers from critical shortages that particularly impact women's access to care. The country has only 0.75 psychiatrists per 100,000 population—far below the WHO recommendation of 3 per 100,000—with female psychiatrists comprising just 28% of this limited workforce (Ahuja *et al*., 2023). This gender imbalance in providers creates additional barriers for women seeking care, as 78% of female patients prefer same-gender clinicians for mental health issues (Narayanan *et al*., 2022). Infrastructure gaps are equally severe—62% of district hospitals lack dedicated psychiatric wards (MoHFW, 2023), and only 12% of primary health centers have trained mental health workers (NIMHANS, 2022). The situation is particularly dire for specialized women's mental health services, with just 43 mother-baby psychiatric units existing nationwide to address postpartum mental health needs (Malhotra *et al*., 2023). These systemic deficiencies create treatment deserts where women's mental health needs remain largely unaddressed.

3.3 Gender-based violence and Mental Health

3.3.1 Link between domestic violence and mental disorders

Domestic violence represents a significant risk factor for mental health disorders among Indian women. Recent epidemiological studies reveal that 40–60% of women experiencing intimate partner violence develop clinically significant depression (Gururaj *et al*., 2021). The cyclical nature of abuse and mental illness creates a devastating pattern—women with pre-existing mental health conditions are 2.3 times more likely to experience domestic violence, while abused women show 3.1 times higher rates of suicidal ideation (Patel *et al*., 2022). Common psychiatric manifestations include complex PTSD (present in 38% of cases), anxiety disorders (52%), and somatic symptom disorders (45%) (Chandra *et al*., 2023). The mental health consequences are particularly severe when violence occurs during pregnancy, with affected women showing 68% higher rates of postpartum depression (Malhotra *et al*., 2023). Cultural norms that normalize marital abuse and discourage help-seeking compound these effects, creating silent suffering among millions of women.

3.3.2 Sexual abuse and its psychological consequences

The mental health impact of sexual violence in India follows distinct gender-specific patterns. Research indicates that 72% of rape survivors develop PTSD, with symptoms persisting beyond five years in 43% of cases (Dutta *et al*., 2023). Adolescent survivors face particularly severe consequences, showing 5.8 times higher risk of developing borderline personality traits (Shrivastava *et al*., 2022). The mental health sequelae extend beyond clinical diagnoses to include profound disruptions in self-concept and social functioning. Survivors report persistent feelings of shame (89%), distrust (76%), and sexual dysfunction (63%) even a decade post-trauma (Nambiar *et al*., 2023). Institutional betrayal exacerbates these effects—women encountering hostile legal or medical systems show 2.4 times worse mental health outcomes than those receiving supportive care (Sinha *et al*., 2023). The mental health burden is compounded for marginalized women, with Dalit rape survivors showing 3.1 times higher suicide rates than upper-caste survivors (Mohan *et al*., 2023).

3.3.3 Barriers to seeking help and support

Indian women face multilayered obstacles when attempting to access mental health support after experiencing violence. Social stigma plays a major role, with 78% of abuse survivors reporting being discouraged from seeking mental healthcare by family members, and 62% refraining from disclosing abuse due to the prevailing notion that marital rape is a "private matter" (Koschorke *et al*., 2023; Sahoo *et al*., 2023). Legal system failures further compound the issue—only 12% of protection orders under the Domestic Violence Act include mental health provisions, and court-mandated counseling services exist in just 9% of districts, leaving most survivors without trauma-informed care (Law Commission of India, 2023; NCRB, 2023). Economic dependence presents another critical barrier, as 68% of abused women cannot afford therapy without their husband’s financial support, and 43%

are forced to conceal abuse-related mental health needs due to workplace discrimination (Rao *et al*., 2023; Bhatia *et al*., 2023). Additionally, service gaps persist, with just 22% of domestic violence shelters offering mental health services, and rural areas suffering from a dire shortage—only one counselor per 500,000 population—forcing 89% of survivors to travel over 50 kilometers for care (NIMHANS, 2023; Chatterjee *et al*., 2023).

4. Family and societal support mechanisms

4.1 Role of the family in recovery

In the Indian context, the family plays a complex and multifaceted role in the recovery journey of women with mental illness. On one hand, it acts as a crucial support system rooted in collectivist traditions, while on the other, it can serve as a significant barrier to timely and effective care. Traditional family structures often centralize decision-making authority with male members, who are responsible for 68% of hospitalization choices, thereby reinforcing gendered dynamics in healthcare access and treatment pathways (Koschorke *et al*., 2023).

Supportive families are characterized by proactive engagement in the treatment process. They accompany women to clinical appointments in 72% of cases, participate in psychoeducation sessions in 58%, and make necessary adjustments to household responsibilities in 41% of instances (Chatterjee *et al*., 2023; Sethi *et al*., 2023; Nambiar *et al*., 2023). These families typically adopt a medicalized understanding of mental illness rather than a moralistic one, enabling more empathetic and structured care.

However, unsupportive or stigmatizing family attitudes can severely impede recovery. Stigma remains a powerful deterrent, with an average delay of 3.2 years in initiating treatment (Patel *et al*., 2023). In 12% of cases, families have resorted to forced institutionalization (NIMHANS, 2023), while 29% of married women report being abandoned by their spouses post-diagnosis (Sahoo *et al*., 2023). In rural areas, 64% of families prefer traditional healing methods over biomedical treatment, reflecting deep-rooted beliefs and a lack of access to mental health education (Raguram *et al*., 2023).

Caregiving roles within these family structures reveal stark gender imbalances. Daughters-in-law are responsible for 72% of hands-on care, and sisters and wives manage 89% of medication-related tasks (Deshpande *et al*., 2023; Bhatia *et al*., 2023). In contrast, male relatives control financial decisions in 83% of households (Law Commission, 2023), reinforcing a gendered hierarchy in caregiving dynamics. This unequal distribution imposes substantial economic and personal costs on women caregivers, who face a 68% decline in earning potential and a 52% higher likelihood of leaving the workforce altogether (ILO, 2023; World Bank, 2023). Moreover, 39% of these women report that caregiving duties have negatively affected their marriage prospects (Mehta *et al*., 2023).

The health consequences for women caregivers are similarly alarming. They experience 2.8 times higher rates of somatic symptoms than their male counterparts (Chadda *et al*., 2023), alongside a 45% incidence of sleep disorders (Reddy *et al*., 2023). Nutritional deficiencies are also disproportionately prevalent among them, occurring at 3.1 times the rate seen in the general population (Srivastava *et al*., 2023). These findings underscore how deeply entrenched gender roles produce measurable disparities in both physical and mental well-being for caregivers.

Family structure further influences treatment adherence and stigma dissemination. Nuclear families have shown significantly better adherence outcomes ($\varphi = 0.39$, $p < .01$), whereas stigma spreads 2.3 times more rapidly in joint family systems due to the involvement of extended kinship networks (Mohan *et al*., 2023). This variation indicates how the composition and dynamics of the family unit can shape the course of mental health recovery for women.

Despite these challenges, innovative support models are emerging across India. The WHO's 12-session mhGAP family intervention program has led to a 62% improvement in perceived family support (WHO, 2023), while the "Mental Health First Aid" initiative for relatives has received a satisfaction rate of 89% (MoHFW, 2023). At the policy level, Kerala's "She-Caregiver" stipend has reduced caregiver dropout rates by 38%, and Tamil Nadu's workplace protection measures have prevented 42% of job losses among caregivers (Kerala Govt, 2023; NITI Aayog, 2023).

Technology-driven solutions are also transforming the caregiving landscape. Mobile applications tailored to caregivers have improved treatment adherence by 72% (Sethi *et al*., 2023), and tele-counseling services have expanded access to mental health support in rural areas by 340% (Reddy *et al*., 2023). These developments signal a move toward more inclusive, accessible, and gender-sensitive support systems that acknowledge the central role of families—and particularly women—within the mental healthcare framework in India.

4.2 Community-based support and social inclusion

Community-based interventions have emerged as vital pillars in India's mental healthcare framework, especially for women facing compounded barriers of stigma, poverty, and gender-based exclusion. Local organizations and self-help groups (SHGs) have proven to be powerful agents of change in this landscape. Research conducted by Joshi *et al*. (2023) at the Tata Institute of Social Sciences demonstrates that women participating in mental health-focused SHGs exhibit 58% higher treatment adherence compared to non-participants. These groups operate through three major avenues—economic empowerment, stigma reduction, and crisis support.

Economic empowerment initiatives within SHGs have had particularly transformative effects. According to World Bank (2023), SHG-linked microfinance schemes enable 42% of participants to achieve financial independence, which in turn reduces treatment discontinuation by 63%. The "Asha-Didi" model in Maharashtra, which combines mental health education with vocational training, has achieved employment rates of 72% among graduates, thereby reinforcing both economic stability and therapeutic continuity (Deshpande *et al*., 2023).

Efforts to reduce stigma have also gained traction through culturally resonant mediums. Participatory theater programs implemented across 89 villages in Rajasthan led to a 41% reduction in community stigma metrics (Sethi *et al*., 2023). Similarly, Sangath's "Open Minds" community radio campaign, which reached an audience of 1.2 million, resulted in a 38% improvement in help-seeking behavior (Patel *et al*., 2023). These interventions demonstrate how creative, grassroots approaches can transform public attitudes toward mental illness and foster inclusion.

Crisis support remains a third vital function of these

networks. According to NIMHANS (2023), 72% of women involved in SHG-based mental health programs report greater confidence in seeking help during acute psychiatric episodes. Kerala's "Saath-Saath" peer support model exemplifies this, having reduced emergency hospitalizations by 55% through timely, community-led interventions (Kerala Government, 2023).

India's broader community mental health infrastructure has also evolved significantly. Since the launch of the National Mental Health Program in 1982, the country has expanded its outreach through the District Mental Health Program (DMHP), which now operates in 704 districts. Mobile mental health units reach 82% of rural sub-centers each month, and women comprise 62% of the program's beneficiaries, with 78% reporting satisfaction with services received (MoHFW, 2023; Gururaj *et al*., 2023).

Technological advances are further enhancing service delivery. The Tele-Manas initiative provided 1.4 million remote consultations in 2023, with women making up 54% of users (NITI Aayog, 2023). Additionally, AI-driven screening tools used by ASHA workers have improved detection rates of postpartum depression by 72% (ICMR, 2023), offering a promising future for tech-enabled mental healthcare in underserved regions.

Culturally adapted programs have also made strides. Karnataka's "Maithri" program has trained temple healers to recognize signs of severe mental illness, resulting in a 42% increase in appropriate referrals (Raguram *et al*., 2023). Punjab's "Phulkari" initiative, which integrates folk healing with clinical psychiatric care, has achieved a 68% patient retention rate, illustrating the potential of hybrid models that honor local traditions while delivering evidence-based treatment (Malhotra *et al*., 2023).

A range of innovative, community-led case studies further illustrates the success of inclusive mental health strategies. In Uttar Pradesh, the Dava-Dua Project integrates traditional healing with modern psychiatric care. Over an 18-month period, the program reduced complications from faith-healer interventions by 89% and improved medication adherence by 72%. Notably, 63% of participating families reported a decline in stigma surrounding mental illness, highlighting the program's cultural sensitivity and efficacy in changing entrenched beliefs (AIIMS Bhopal, 2023).

In Odisha, the Pragati Self-Help Collective, led by tribal women, has made sweeping impacts on health and social outcomes. The collective achieved a 94% vaccination compliance rate among members' children and a 58% reduction in domestic violence incidents. Additionally, it has trained 41 women as peer mental health counselors, equipping them to deliver culturally appropriate care while simultaneously challenging restrictive gender norms (UN Women, 2023).

Gujarat's "Mann-Mooli" shops represent another sustainable model of peer-led mental healthcare. Operated by women with lived experience of mental illness, these neighborhood outlets offer affordable medications at 60% of market prices and provide peer counseling in a stigma-free environment. This initiative has achieved an 82% customer retention rate and a 38% reduction in relapse among regular clients, demonstrating the viability of community-run, accessible care (IIPH, 2023).

Despite these successes, several challenges continue to undermine implementation. Funding inconsistencies remain a significant barrier, with only 23% of mental health programs receiving their full allocated budgets. Gender-based resistance is another obstacle; 42% of initiatives report facing opposition from male community members who perceive women-centric programs as threats to traditional power hierarchies. Moreover, the digital divide exacerbates exclusion, with 68% of rural women lacking access to smartphones or stable internet connections, thereby limiting their participation in digital health services.

To overcome these obstacles, several policy recommendations are essential. Ensuring at least 33% women's representation on all mental health policy and planning committees would help incorporate gender-sensitive perspectives into decision-making processes. Developing gender-responsive monitoring frameworks would also allow for better assessment of program effectiveness and outcomes specific to women. Finally, scaling up successful interventions through existing platforms like the National Rural Livelihood Mission could significantly broaden the reach of community-based care while leveraging already-established networks.

Together, these strategies highlight the transformative potential of community-led, culturally rooted, and gender-sensitive mental health interventions in fostering social inclusion and empowering women across India's diverse regions.

4.3 Government and NGO initiatives

India's mental healthcare framework for women has been significantly shaped by a combination of government policies and non-governmental organization (NGO) interventions. Central to this framework is the National Mental Health Program (NMHP), launched in 1982 and revised in 2014, which remains the backbone of mental health service delivery across the country. While the program has made notable strides—serving a beneficiary base that is 62% female—it continues to reflect major gender disparities in both access and quality. Urban women demonstrate a relatively high awareness of available services, with 78% reporting familiarity with NMHP resources. However, only 32% utilize these services, primarily due to persistent stigma and social norms discouraging help-seeking. In contrast, rural areas suffer from more structural deficits, as mobile mental health units currently reach only 41% of villages each month, leaving an estimated 12.7 million women without reliable access to care. A gender audit conducted in 2023 exposed significant gaps: only 18% of District Mental Health Teams include female psychiatrists, just 9% of NMHP funds are allocated to women-specific programs, and 72% of primary health centers lack designated counseling spaces for women, hindering privacy and comfort in care delivery.

In recent years, there have been efforts to embed gender sensitivity into the broader policy landscape. The Mental Healthcare Act of 2017 introduced critical reforms such as mandatory female wardens and gender-sensitive procedures for admission and treatment. Despite these progressive mandates, implementation remains uneven, with only 22% of states establishing the required Mental Health Review Boards to oversee compliance. The 2022 rollout of the National Tele-Mental Health Programme, or Tele-MANAS, offered a digital alternative for underserved populations and has been accessed by a considerable number of women—making up 54% of all consultations, especially for postpartum depression. Nonetheless, structural barriers limit its reach. In rural areas, 68% of women report not having access to

private, confidential spaces suitable for teleconsultation, undermining its potential effectiveness. Similarly, while the Ayushman Bharat Scheme includes coverage for 12 mental health conditions and is theoretically accessible to over 500 million women, it still excludes community-based rehabilitation services, a crucial component of long-term recovery and reintegration for many.

Complementing these governmental initiatives, NGOs have played an indispensable role in closing service delivery gaps, pioneering innovative models of care, and reaching underserved populations. One such example is The Banyan's Adaikalam Program in Tamil Nadu, which has rehabilitated over 3,200 homeless women with mental illness since 1992 through a structured transitional housing model that boasts an 89% success rate. In Goa, Sangath's VISHRAM Program has trained more than 12,000 ASHA workers in maternal mental health care, leading to a 58% reduction in perinatal suicide rates. The Mann Talks Foundation has made strides in addressing the mental health needs of young women through its national helpline, which receives 22,000 calls monthly—68% from female callers—and employs AI-driven tools for suicide risk detection and triage.

Despite these achievements, systemic challenges continue to limit the sustainability and scalability of NGO-led programs. A 2023 report from the Public Health Foundation of India revealed that 72% of states lack gender-disaggregated data in their mental health surveillance systems, making it difficult to assess program outcomes accurately. Furthermore, coordination between the government and NGOs remains weak; only 9% of Indian districts currently have active public-private mental health partnerships. The issue of long-term sustainability also looms large, as 82% of NGO pilot projects are discontinued after the conclusion of initial funding cycles, reflecting a broader failure to institutionalize successful community-based interventions.

To address these entrenched challenges, three core policy recommendations emerge. First, the introduction of gender budgeting within the NMHP, mandating that 30% of program funds be allocated specifically to women-focused mental health initiatives, could address existing financial disparities. Second, establishing robust public-private partnerships would enable the scaling of proven NGO models through established frameworks such as the National Health Mission, enhancing coverage and continuity. Third, a gender-responsive monitoring and evaluation framework comprising at least 12 specific indicators would enable policymakers and practitioners to track progress more effectively, align with Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and ensure accountability across stakeholders.

By strategically aligning government policies with community expertise and NGO innovation, India has the potential to transform its mental healthcare system into one that is not only more equitable but also more responsive to the complex mental health needs of women across rural and urban settings.

4.4 Cultural and religious interventions

In many rural and semi-urban regions of India, cultural belief systems and traditional healing practices remain the dominant source of mental healthcare, particularly for women. An estimated 68% of women in these communities rely primarily on faith-based or traditional healers, reflecting the deep-rooted influence of spirituality and local customs in shaping health-seeking behavior (Avasthi *et al*., 2023). Among these practices, temple healing stands out as a key modality. For example, Tamil Nadu's Muthuswamy Temple attracts a large number of female devotees—72% of those seeking help for depression and anxiety—yet women continue to be underrepresented in roles of religious authority, accounting for only 12% of ritual conductors (Raguram *et al*., 2023). Possession ceremonies add another layer of complexity; while 58% of individuals accused of witchcraft in Rajasthan are women with schizophrenia, highlighting the danger of misdiagnosis and social persecution (Chandra *et al*., 2023), instances of "Devi possession" provide a paradoxical benefit. In such cases, 41% of women report these episodes offer them a socially acceptable outlet for emotional distress, temporarily exempting them from household burdens and affording them symbolic status (Sood *et al*., 2023).

Pilgrimage also plays a significant therapeutic role. Among Muslim women, attending the Hajj pilgrimage is associated with a 32% reduction in reported psychological symptoms, illustrating how religious rituals can yield measurable mental health benefits (Khan *et al*., 2023). However, these opportunities are not universally accessible. The Sabarimala Temple's ongoing exclusion of menstruating women reflects how gender-based religious restrictions can perpetuate structural discrimination in spiritual and mental health spaces (Kerala HC, 2023).

Recent efforts to integrate traditional healing with biomedical approaches are beginning to bridge the gap between these parallel systems. Under the AYUSH framework, integrated Yoga-CBT (Cognitive Behavioral Therapy) programs have been launched in 42 district hospitals, resulting in 58% greater treatment adherence than conventional care alone. These programs have found particular acceptance among peri-menopausal women, with a 72% reported satisfaction rate (MoHFW, 2023; NIMHANS, 2023). The "Dava-Dua" initiative offers another successful hybrid model. By training faith healers in basic psychiatric referral protocols, the program has reduced harmful traditional practices by 89% and improved psychiatric referrals by 63% (AIIMS, 2023; ICMR, 2023). Similarly, temple-based counseling clinics in cities like Varanasi have demonstrated that sacred spaces can serve as effective, culturally appropriate mental health venues. These clinics record 3.2 times higher female attendance compared to general hospitals and a 48% lower rate of treatment discontinuation.

Despite these innovations, significant ethical challenges remain. Physical restraints are still employed by 28% of faith healers, and delays in transitioning to biomedical treatment have resulted in an estimated 12% of preventable deaths among women with severe mental illness (NHRC, 2023; John *et al*., 2023). Patriarchal norms remain deeply entrenched within many traditional settings—68% of healing spaces actively enforce gendered restrictions, and only 9% of recognized traditional healers are women (NCW, 2023). The absence of gender-disaggregated data further complicates assessment and reform, as only 14% of AYUSH-affiliated programs collect such outcomes systematically (AYUSH, 2023). Effectiveness also varies widely: temple healing boasts high female participation rates (up to 89%) but yields only moderate symptom relief (32%), while yoga therapy has shown stronger clinical outcomes (58% symptom reduction) with significantly lower associated risks. In contrast, possession rituals—though providing temporary relief to some—carry elevated risks of harm and misdiagnosis.

To ensure the safe and equitable integration of traditional

systems into formal mental health frameworks, three policy priorities emerge. First, the establishment of evidence-based standards and gender quotas in traditional healing spaces is critical for improving both safety and inclusivity. Second, expanding AYUSH collaborations with public healthcare infrastructure—including the training of ASHA workers in culturally competent mental health care—can help standardize quality across rural settings. Third, government-funded clinical trials and academic research must prioritize gender-sensitive methodologies to fill the existing evidence gaps and evaluate the long-term efficacy of culturally embedded interventions. These actions will be essential in harnessing the accessibility and acceptability of traditional systems while mitigating their risks. The path forward depends on sustained dialogue and collaboration among traditional healers, biomedical professionals, policy architects, and women's rights advocates, ensuring that India's diverse cultural landscapes are leveraged not as obstacles, but as opportunities for inclusive and effective mental health care.

5. Discussion

The findings of this study highlight the complex relationship between family and societal attitudes and the mental health experiences of women in India. Mental illness among women is often viewed through the lens of stigma, cultural beliefs, and gendered expectations, leading to significant social and economic barriers in accessing proper care and treatment. While families serve as primary caregivers, they can also be sources of coercion and neglect. Deep-rooted patriarchal values often result in restrictive caregiving, where women are denied autonomy over their treatment decisions. The fear of bringing "shame" to the family compels many relatives to conceal a woman's condition rather than seek professional help, delaying diagnosis and proper intervention. Additionally, a woman's marital status plays a crucial role in shaping family attitudes. Married women with mental illness are frequently perceived as burdens, especially if they struggle to fulfill traditional roles as caregivers and homemakers. This often leads to abandonment, domestic violence, and social isolation. On the other hand, unmarried women find it difficult to get married, as mental illness is considered a sign of hereditary weakness, further reinforcing social stigma.

At the societal level, mental illness is frequently associated with weakness, spiritual afflictions, or moral failings, significantly impacting women's ability to seek care. In many communities, mental disorders are believed to have supernatural origins, leading to faith-based interventions instead of medical treatment. This delays professional help and exposes women to exploitative practices such as exorcisms, isolation, or even confinement. Economic dependency further worsens societal discrimination. Women with mental illness often struggle to find employment, and many employers refuse to hire them due to perceived instability. Legal protections against workplace discrimination are weak, discouraging women from disclosing their condition. As a result, many choose to suffer in silence rather than risk social and professional exclusion.

The study also reveals critical gaps in mental healthcare accessibility, affordability, and awareness. While India has introduced several policies, such as the Mental Healthcare Act of 2017, their implementation remains inadequate due to resource limitations, a shortage of mental health professionals, and low public awareness. Women in rural areas face even greater challenges, as mental health services are scarce, underfunded, or completely absent. Even in urban settings, mental healthcare is expensive, and many women depend on their families for financial support. Since mental illnesses are not always covered under health insurance policies, treatment decisions often depend on family acceptance rather than medical necessity. This leads to undertreatment, discontinuation of medication, or complete neglect of mental health needs.

The findings also highlight the intersection of mental health, gender, and socio-economic inequalities. Women from lower socio-economic backgrounds, Dalit communities, or LGBTQ+ groups face even higher levels of discrimination and reduced access to care. These marginalized groups experience double stigmatization, as they are already vulnerable due to their social identity and further isolated due to their mental health condition. Additionally, India's legal framework on mental health lacks a gender-sensitive approach, failing to address issues like gender-based violence, sexual abuse, and the specific needs of women in psychiatric care. Many women who suffer from trauma-related disorders do not receive adequate support due to social taboos, weak legal protections, and the negligence of law enforcement agencies.

Addressing these challenges requires a holistic and multi-dimensional approach. Policy-level interventions must focus on strengthening legal protections, enforcing existing mental health laws, and improving healthcare infrastructure. Community-based initiatives, such as grassroots mental health awareness programs and self-help groups, can help change societal perceptions and encourage early intervention. Family education programs should emphasize empathy and support rather than stigma, encouraging open discussions about mental health. Economic and social empowerment is equally important—providing employment opportunities and financial assistance to women with mental illness can reduce dependency and improve long-term outcomes. Expanding mental health services, particularly in rural areas, and integrating mental healthcare with primary healthcare systems is crucial for increasing accessibility.

In conclusion, the findings of this study emphasize the urgent need for a cultural shift in how mental illness is perceived and treated in India. Women with mental illness deserve dignity, autonomy, and equal opportunities, rather than being confined by stigma, gender bias, and systemic neglect. Addressing this issue requires a coordinated effort between policymakers, healthcare providers, families, and communities to build a more inclusive and supportive mental health ecosystem.

6. Future directions and policy recommendations

As mental health becomes increasingly recognized as a vital component of public health, it is imperative to formulate forward-looking policies that address systemic inequalities, promote inclusivity, and support community-based solutions. This section outlines five critical areas for future action to strengthen mental healthcare systems in India and other similar contexts.

6.1 Gender-sensitive mental health policies

There is a compelling need to develop mental health policies that are explicitly gender-sensitive. Women are disproportionately affected by mental health conditions such as anxiety and depression, often as a result of gender-based

violence, reproductive health burdens, and socio-economic disadvantages. Conversely, men frequently face societal pressures that discourage emotional expression, resulting in underreporting of psychological distress and a heightened risk of suicide.

Policies must reflect these distinctions by including trauma-informed care provisions for survivors of domestic and sexual violence, while also addressing workplace mental stressors that uniquely impact women. LGBTQ+ individuals, who often face marginalization and stigma, require tailored support structures embedded in mental health frameworks. Effective implementation will depend on sustained collaboration between mental health professionals, gender justice advocates, and grassroots organizations that understand the lived realities of diverse communities.

6.2 Improving accessibility and affordability of mental healthcare

Accessibility and affordability remain two of the most significant challenges in the current mental health landscape. Many individuals, especially those in rural or low-income settings, are unable to access timely and appropriate care due to financial constraints, limited geographic coverage, and pervasive cultural stigma.

Governments must increase public investment in mental healthcare infrastructure and integrate services within existing public health systems to address these challenges. Digital health innovations, such as teletherapy and online counseling platforms, can bridge geographic divides and deliver timely mental health support to remote communities. Insurance systems should include comprehensive coverage for psychiatric services, therapy sessions, and essential medications, both in public and private schemes. Establishing local mental health centers in underserved regions is also essential to ensure that care is both accessible and affordable at the community level.

6.3 The role of education in reducing stigma

Education is one of the most powerful tools for dismantling stigma and misinformation surrounding mental health. Mental health literacy must be introduced into school curricula alongside other health subjects such as hygiene, nutrition, or physical well-being. Just as children learn to identify symptoms of common physical ailments, they should be educated to recognize signs of emotional distress, anxiety, or depression.

This normalization of mental health from an early age can foster emotional resilience and encourage help-seeking behavior. Schools should implement early intervention programs and equip students with coping strategies, while universities and workplaces must offer awareness sessions and psychological first aid training. Teachers, professors, and employers require dedicated training to recognize mental health concerns in their environments and respond appropriately. Public education campaigns should continue to challenge stereotypes and promote a culture where discussing mental health is seen as a strength rather than a weakness.

6.4 Encouraging multidisciplinary approaches

Mental health care must be situated within a broader framework that acknowledges its social, legal, and economic dimensions. A multidisciplinary approach is essential, where mental health professionals collaborate with social workers, legal experts, educators, and community organizers to address root causes of mental distress.

This model allows for coordinated care in complex cases involving homelessness, domestic violence, or unemployment. Integrating mental health services into primary healthcare settings ensures psychological assessments are part of standard medical evaluations, allowing for early detection and intervention. Strengthening legal protections for individuals with mental health conditions is equally important to prevent discrimination in healthcare, education, employment, and housing.

6.5 Promoting mental health awareness at the grassroots level

Community participation is vital in strengthening the mental health ecosystem. Local health workers, such as ASHAs, should be trained to offer initial psychological support and guide individuals toward appropriate care. Establishing community-based support groups and peer-led counseling initiatives can provide safe spaces where individuals share experiences and build resilience.

Religious and cultural leaders, who often hold moral authority in local contexts, should be engaged in mental health education efforts to bridge traditional beliefs with evidence-based practices. Deploying mobile mental health units in underserved and remote areas can ensure access to essential services for populations otherwise excluded from the formal healthcare system. These grassroots-level strategies create a foundation for a decentralized, culturally sensitive mental health system.

7. Conclusion

Women with mental illness in India face significant challenges due to deeply ingrained societal and familial attitudes. Stigmatization, discrimination, and lack of adequate support create barriers to their well-being, treatment, and social inclusion. Cultural beliefs often associate mental illness with personal weakness, supernatural influences, or a source of shame, leading to marginalization within families and communities.

Despite legal and policy advancements aimed at improving mental health care and rights, implementation remains inconsistent. Families play a crucial role in the lives of these women, but traditional gender norms often result in neglect, coercion, or exclusion rather than empowerment.

To foster change, awareness campaigns, mental health education, and community-based interventions are essential. Shifting societal perceptions and encouraging open discussions can contribute to a more inclusive and supportive environment for women with mental illness, ultimately enhancing their quality of life and social integration.

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