

Intervening in Violence & Abuse

Introduction

The World Health Organisation has shown that where women prosper, communities thrive. In South Africa, however, extraordinarily high rates of violence and abuse mean that many women are unable break out of the cycle of poverty. Poverty and inequality are crucial social dynamics that have contributed to South Africa's burden of violence and abuse. One of the most significant and debilitating consequences of abuse is mental illness.



PMHP data shows that women who experience domestic violence are at a 24 times greater risk of experiencing a mental illness.

Prevalence & impacts

Abuse is a proven risk factor for South Africa's most prevalent and serious health problems, including HIV and sexually transmitted infections, unintended pregnancy, pregnancy complications or miscarriages, substance misuse, and common mental disorders, such as post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, and suicidality.

Mental illness can decrease women's ability to access health services, antenatal care and development opportunities. It also decreases women's ability to access HIV/AIDS treatment for themselves and their children.

Mental health services: a critical intervention

The consequences of abuse may be felt from generation to generation. Abuse and violence undermine social cohesion and the nation's social and economic development. They contribute to a substantial burden of preventable mortality and physical and psychological disability. Addressing the mental health needs of mothers has clear positive implications for the wellbeing of women, their children and families.

A wide body of research shows that in order to address the impact of abuse, psychological services for victims must be strengthened. The PMHP shows that this may best be achieved by providing an accessible, integrated national service.

The PMHP intervention

During pregnancy, women access health services for their antenatal care on a regular basis. By providing a mental health service at the same site where women receive their antenatal care, the PMHP provides a unique model for addressing a frequent and debilitating consequence of abuse – mental illness.

When women are listened to and validated in a safe and therapeutic environment. They may begin to restore their self-esteem and locus of control. With improved mood will come improved energy levels and motivation. Women may be better empowered to identify what actions they may take themselves to overcome their victimisation. These are key goals of the PMHP service.

The PMHP provides mental health services to mothers, conducts research to model effective and relevant interventions and engages in advocacy and policy development.

Furthermore, the PMHP runs an extensive training programme for health workers in maternal mental health. A crucial component of this interactive process is addressing the well-documented phenomenon of staff's physical and emotional abuse of pregnant women.

Caring for mothers is caring for the future. Through maternal mental health interventions, vulnerable women can be supported and empowered. The result is that they are better able to secure their own well-being, and the well-being of their children.

The crisis of abuse in South Africa

- **over 50% of women report experiencing intimate partner violence**
- **20% of women surveyed in antenatal clinics in Soweto reported sexual violence by an intimate partner**
- **68% reported psychological abuse**
- **39% of girls report having undergone some form of sexual violence**
- **45% of children had witnessed their mother being beaten**