

# Social Determinants of Mental Health in Immigrant Women

A deeper dive into how immigration and other social factors contribute to decline in mental health in immigrant women.

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## What is Mental Health?

According to the World Health Organization (WHO) mental health is: “an integral and essential component of health, and health is a state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity.”<sup>1</sup> This definition implies that mental health is more than just the absence of mental health disorders or disabilities.<sup>1</sup>

Mental health is an important part of life that determines the decisions we make, the way we act, and the way we deal with stress.<sup>2</sup> Maintaining it is crucial for our psychological, emotional, physical, and social well-being.<sup>2</sup> Mental health conditions can further have a significant impact on relationships, performance, and school or work; therefore, they must be addressed accordingly.<sup>2</sup> Unfortunately, there is stigma surrounding mental health making it a global problem that keeps increasing worldwide.

According to the World Health Organization, around 450 million people struggle with mental health illnesses making it the leading cause of disability in the world.<sup>1</sup> The WHO states: “Poor mental health is also associated with rapid social change, stressful work conditions, gender discrimination, social exclusion, unhealthy lifestyle, physical ill-health and human rights violations.”<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, individuals suffering from mental health disorders are more likely to develop comorbidities such as cardiovascular diseases and eating disorders. Both men and women experience mental health disorders, however for the purpose of this post we will dive into women’s mental health with a focus on mainly immigrant women and social determinants that influence their mental health. By the end of this post, we will outline how we can support women who are struggling with these challenges.

## Immigration and Other Social Factors

Women are at a higher risk of developing mental health disorders than men. If we narrow this broad category of women down, we can analyze mental health in immigrant women which is something that is not spoken of often. Though mental health can be affected by many things, immigration itself can be a significant factor contributing to mental health decline in women. Immigration can be very stressful for everyone, and this stress progresses post-immigration. Many individuals move from their home country to another country in hopes of gaining a better future, however upon arrival the stress of being unable to adapt to the new country can decline mental health of women significantly. This decline can be attributed to many factors:

- Changes in socioeconomic status
- Discriminatory treatment
- Language/cultural barriers

Let's look at how these factors impact mental health.

#### Changes in socioeconomic status

Socioeconomic status is measured as a combination of education, income, and occupation. It influences a person's behavior, perception, medical conditions, and mental health.<sup>3</sup> This can pose as a factor influencing mental health in immigrant women. Immigrant women often face a socioeconomic disadvantage when it comes to employment. First, the gender gap in employment still exists making it harder for women to find jobs. Second, some degrees completed back home may not be valid in the new country, this ultimately results in women doing work they are overqualified for. For example, some women may have a Doctor of Medicine degree in their home country but upon immigration are working as medical assistants instead. Racialized minority immigrant women might also get paid less. Some immigrant women might be lack in training resulting in them picking up part-time, temporary jobs at low wages resulting in low financial security.<sup>3</sup> This can impact mental health as it is a step down on the social ladder. Furthermore, living circumstances and lack of social support is also linked to mental health disorders.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, financial and employment constraints result in lack of resources to cope because they have low financial security and might not have health insurance causing them to have more stressors.<sup>3</sup>

## Discriminatory treatment

Racism and discrimination are prominent worldwide often leading to trauma. Racism can result in an inability to receive proper care, therefore becoming a significant factor that can worsen existing mental health conditions.<sup>5</sup> It affects a person's ability to access health resources including mental health treatment.<sup>5</sup> Immigrants in general are often perceived very poorly and mostly looked down upon.<sup>3</sup> Immigrant women may experience discrimination due to their culture, religion, lack of financial resources and support, or even family. Muslim women are often treated different in the workplace especially because they stand out if they wear a hijab. This leads to feelings of insecurity and uneasiness. The combination of stigmas surrounding mental health and discrimination against immigrant women may prevent them from seeking help for their mental health illnesses.<sup>3</sup>

## Language/cultural barriers

Language and cultural barriers can be a limitation to employment and cause of self-isolation in racialized immigrant women.<sup>3</sup> Being unemployed is already hard enough, but social isolation can worsen mental health as the individual lacks support.<sup>3</sup> Inability to interact and communicate with others makes it harder to expand a person's social network and develop relationships within the social and healthcare system.<sup>3</sup> Health services might also be underused by immigrant women due to religious barriers. Some might present with symptoms like headache rather than depression as the former is more socially acceptable for them culturally.<sup>3</sup>

## Immigrant Mental Health Awareness

Gaps in knowledge regarding mental health in immigrant women still exist and require more research. Regardless, by identifying these issues early on we can help immigrant women receive adequate treatment for their mental health disorders. The Multicultural Women's Organization of Newfoundland and Labrador (MWONL) aims to provide services and programs that facilitate the integration of immigrant women and families.<sup>4</sup> This organization is easily accessible and is a way to provide women with a social support network ultimately benefitting their mental health.<sup>4</sup> The MWONL is a women-centered organization that empowers women to voice their choices and enables several opportunities for them.<sup>4</sup> It is also a racism and discrimination free environment providing immigrant women with a safe space.<sup>4</sup>

Overall, MWONL is a wonderful organization that helps women in need by becoming a support system for them.

## Conclusion

Immigration is a social determinant of mental health and mental health can be further influenced by other social factors such as socioeconomic status, discriminatory treatment, and language/cultural barriers. Women are more likely to develop mental health disorders than men and combining this with immigration induced stress, immigrant women become a high-risk group for developing these conditions. It is important to recognize what factors influence immigrant women and educate ourselves about them. By promoting immigrant women's mental health, we can help those that are hesitant to receive help or provide those with resources that cannot access them easily. Overall, the first step to raising awareness is acknowledging that mental health in immigrant women is a significant problem and should be identified by healthcare professionals early on so adequate treatment can be received. The MWONL is a great place for immigrant women to seek help when in need.

## References

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