Improving the mental health of women and girls: psychiatrists as partners for change

The WPA was established to promote the advancement of psychiatry and mental health for all citizens of the world. As a global association, it is in a unique position to support the initiatives of its Member Societies and work in partnership with regional societies and other international organizations.

Its ability to promote sustainable change and improvement depends on two main factors. One is its capacity to collaborate successfully with other organizations. The other is its potential to engage psychiatrists from around the world in new challenges. The expertise of psychiatrists is essential to promote good health and offer comprehensive health care. Our patients and their families need us to work alongside them and other partners in clinical practice, teaching, research and advocacy¹. The WPA and its Member Societies need to be centrally involved in national and international debates, policies and initiatives in mental health.

Every three years the WPA reassesses priorities within its strategy. Recent action plans have focused on defining the needs for advancement in psychiatry and mental health, on education and psychiatry, and on social justice and mental health^{2,3}. Building on all these initiatives, the priority for action in 2017-2020 will be the mental health of women and girls, particularly those living in adversity caused by poverty, war, natural disasters, and exposure to interpersonal violence and human rights abuse⁴. Mental health is integral to women's overall health, and connected closely with their central roles in the development of civil societies and the health and functioning of their families. It is a neglected priority in health, child development and economic development, especially but not exclusively in low- and middle-income countries⁵.

The mental health of women and girls is intimately and intricately interwoven with their social status, economic status

and hence their participation as valued members of society. From conception, the life experiences of women and girls differ from those of men and boys. The biggest differences reflect disparities in opportunities, responsibilities and roles through life. These have consequences for all aspects of health, including mental health⁵. Overlooking the mental health needs of women has significant, deleterious effects on the functioning of women and their families and the wellbeing of the next generation, and on social cohesion. M. French Gates wrote recently in the journal *Science* that "the development field needs to be more serious about gender inequities and women's empowerment... helping women and girls realize their own power to advance the wellbeing of their families, their communities, and their societies"⁶.

Participation and the empowerment underlying it, as advocated also by UN Women, are components of good mental health⁷ and wellbeing⁸. The strategies for promoting mental health in women and girls and tackling mental health problems include a strong focus on changing social attitudes and investment⁹, which require involvement of multiple stakeholders.

The WPA program will support mental health promotion among women and girls as well as the prevention and treatment of mental illnesses. It will take necessarily a cross-sectoral approach¹⁰. It will collaborate in local and international initiatives to address human rights, education, social and economic participation, safety and freedom from discrimination, as an essential first step to improving mental health. The WPA will work with partners to provide unbiased information about the magnitude and nature of the problems in different settings and globally and the interventions that can be used by health and social services and other sectors to promote mental health. In the health sector, it will support gender-sensitive clinical and public health ser-

vices, and gender-informed research to gather local evidence and monitor and evaluate interventions.

The WPA will work with local and international partners in specific disadvantaged regions to identify needs, develop projects and evaluate the outcomes and their sustainability. The settings for action include community groups, schools, primary health care, and maternal and child health services. The WPA will encourage psychiatrists and other mental health professionals to use their expertise in diverse settings to promote participatory approaches to health and mental health and facilitate the mental health work of non-specialists across a range of community settings¹¹. Important needs are: the psychological consequences of violence, including violence in the home, genital mutilation, rape and the trafficking of women and girls for prostitution; improving mental health in the perinatal period; the isolation of women as caregivers; deaths from suicide among young women in low- and middle-income countries; and the needs of women and girls in displaced populations and in emergencies.

The mental health challenges facing women and men are different. The needs of women and girls are considered separately for this reason. The fact that the WPA is developing a program on women's mental health does not neglect the mental health needs of men and boys. On the contrary, we wish to understand and exploit the interconnected needs of women and girls, men and boys and develop interventions that work across genders as well as those that are gender specific.

This program will be complemented by another one that focuses on improving the conditions for people living with long-standing mental illnesses and disabilities, and their caregivers, in mental hospitals and other settings. Both will be built on a set of principles for the

prevention and treatment of mental ill health and the promotion of mental health¹², matched with the purposes of WPA. They will be supported by activities in a range of topics important to the future of psychiatry and improved mental health for women, men and children around the world.

These plans gain momentum from the international attention focused on the need to include both the health of women (and children)⁸ and mental health¹³ among the new sustainable development goals. The WPA can contribute to the

establishment and achievement of these goals in low- and middle-income countries, and equivalent initiatives among disadvantaged groups in high-income settings. My colleagues and I are eager to receive comments and suggestions about how, together, we can develop these programs.

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WPA Scientific Sections: update on the activities

Scientific Sections are coming up as an essential component of WPA and play a pivotal role in promoting and disseminating scientific knowledge around the globe. The current number of Sections has increased to 72, with Sections on Positive Psychiatry, Stress Research, and Early Career Psychiatrists as the new ones approved during 2015. Inclusion of Early Career Psychiatrists is proving an important step towards involvement of young psychiatrists in the WPA functioning as well as for developing their leadership skills and enhancing their organizational abilities.

As Sections keep on having their elections every three years, it is encouraging to note that new and younger members are getting elected for officer positions. This indeed reflects their keen desire and enthusiasm for their future contributions towards WPA's work. The Sections' Operational Committee is currently reviewing the by-laws related to Sections' functioning and is going to submit its recommendations to the Planning Committee. There have also been some discussions on Sections' future work, including clustering of Sections on the basis of common interests and activities. This will hopefully help to promote further collaboration and links among Sections.

During the years 2014-2015, there has been a noticeable increase in the num-

ber of WPA co-sponsored meetings, joint intersectional activities and other related intersectional accomplishments^{1,2}. Scientific Sections have also continued developing training courses and producing position statements. Noteworthy among the latter is the Position Statement on Spirituality and Religion in Psychiatry, published in the February 2016 issue of *World Psychiatry*³.

The WPA Action Plan for 2014-2017^{4,5} has been another focal point for many Sections' activities during this triennium. Sections have adapted the theme of promotion of mental health as a priority in their work, along with initiating various programmes in the areas of mental health promotion and prevention psychiatry by producing educational materials for the WPA website.

Intersectional collaboration has continued to be a focused activity for a number of Sections during the current triennium. Organization of Intersectional Forums and Intersectional Educational Programmes has been an ongoing practice at WPA Regional and International Conferences held in Romania, Taiwan and Philippines, and similar activities are planned for the forthcoming meetings in Turkey and South Africa during this year.

Section officers and members are also contributing extensively to the WPA official journal *World Psychiatry*⁶⁻¹³. Their

interest and participation in the development of the chapter on mental disorders of the ICD-11 is another ongoing contribution to the psychiatric field¹⁴⁻¹⁷.

Programmes promoting the interest of medical students in the field of psychiatry as a future career have also been a focus for the current work of Sections. Sections on Education and Early Career Psychiatrists, in particular, have been involved in formulating a plan with the following remit: a) to prepare a WPA statement on "Promoting psychiatry as an inspiring medical speciality and introducing psychiatry as a prospective future career for medical students"; b) to set up programmes for promotion of psychiatry in undergraduate medical education, exploring innovative ways of engaging medical students in psychiatry and collating examples of good practice; c) to prepare general educational materials for medical students introducing psychiatry as an essential medical discipline; d) to prepare an outline of the topics that need to be incorporated in the undergraduate curricula. It is expected that this work will be completed and highlighted in the scientific deliberations of 2016 WPA International Conferences, with a proposed round table discussion in Cape Town on developments in this area.

It is anticipated that the current enthusiasm of Sections' leadership and