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Creating Safe Spaces: Supporting Women's Mental Health in Urban Slum Communities

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ABSTRACT :

In urban slum communities, women's mental health often neglected and bypassed through socio-economic challenges, cultural stigmas, unethical rituals and practices and pervasive neglect becomes a matter of concern particularly for and among women. Such cases can be evidently apparent due to the increase in the rate of mental instability caused by the traditional mindsets in these areas prioritising physical survival over emotional well being. Women's mental health is often misunderstood, invalidated, and met with criticism or silence along with physical, psychological and emotional abuse. Financial hardships further restricts access to therapies, making it an unattainable luxury. This paper highlights the urgent need for Creating safe spaces for transformation and betterment which can provide women with a secure environment to express themselves. Safe spaces also serve as platforms for healing, and empowerment. Community driven initiatives in addition to the implementation of policies such as the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, 2005 and the Mental Healthcare Act, 2017 must be strengthened to ensure that women in marginalized urban areas can utilise their rights. Hence, these initiatives pave the way for a more inclusive and resilient community, where women are heard, supported, and empowered.

Introduction :

The idea of safe spaces in urban slum areas has a significant position and contribution in addressing about women's mental health challenges and problems. A safe space for women is a positive and supportive environment created for them to express themselves freely, without fearing any judgment, criticism, discrimination, or harm (UN Women, 2021). Thus, these spaces act as a refuge for women which rescues them from the societal pressures, seeking emotional support, education, and empowerment (WHO, 2016). The creation of such spaces is urgent as well as crucial in breaking the silence around mental health and offering opportunities for personal growth, healing, and resilience. Women in the slum areas often face diverse challenges that severely affects their mental well-being. The National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB), states alarmingly high rate of cases of domestic violence and sexual abuse in the urban slum communities, where patriarchal norms create an unsafe environment encouraging exploitation and neglect (NCRB, 2022). Studies suggests that although 70% of the women in these areas face some sort of violence or oppression during their lifetime, only a fraction of them gather the courage to report or seek help (Das & Ghosh, 2016). In addition to that, mental health literacy remains critically low in these societal settings due to lack of understanding, patriarchy as well as economic instability, leading to misconceptions that mental health concerns are signs of weakness (Kishore et al., 2015).

The financial dependency among women upon men in urban slums escalates and encourages these issues. Therapies and mental health services are become highly inaccessible due to its exorbitant nature (Verma et al., 2019). As a result, women are left to deal with their emotional distress alone, with little or no support (Lund et al., 2014). Furthermore, expressing feelings of anxiety, depression, or trauma are disbelieved and criticized. In such scenarios, the idea of creating safe spaces becomes apparently essential. These spaces encourage women to share their experiences, learn about their own rights, and access mental health resources, by providing a secure environment (Patel et al., 2010). It is also responsible in building confidence among them. Community based programmes offer chances for women to connect with people in the society, get guidance, and develop coping mechanisms through healing processes (CDC, 2020). Studies show that community support significantly reduces the feelings of isolation. Further, it even encourages education among women in the urban slum areas (Babak Moeini & Jahanfar, 2021). All this ensures women to regain their dignity and strength.

Review of Literature :

1.1 Social determinants of mental health of women living in slum

Several studies have mentioned about the impact of social determinants on women's mental health, particularly in the slum areas (Patel et al., 2010; Lund et al., 2014). Socio-economic factors such as poverty, unemployment, and the lack of education, along with poor living conditions, food insecurity, and lack of social support, heavily influences poor mental health among women living in these social settings leading to gender disparities gender-based violence, discrimination, and limited access to healthcare services (WHO, 2016). Studies highlighted in this research show that inadequate housing and limited access to basic needs create an environment of chronic stress causing mental health risks. The systematic analysis of 23 studies highlights the need for focused actions that identifies these social determinants. Improving the economic opportunities, developing social support systems, and

implementing gender sensitive policies can be impactful in promoting mental health awareness and its betterment among women. These findings emphasize upon the necessity of a comprehensive social and economic reforms to improve the overall well-being of women living in slums.

1.2 A Qualitative Assessment of Place and Mental Health

Researches has been talking about the impact of spaces on health for quite a long time, talking about factors such as the environment around and social interactions putting an impact mental well-being (WHO, 2016). The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) studied that homes, workplaces, schools, parks, and religious spaces shapes the health outcomes. Although, studies specifically link places to mental health in urban slums that remain limited, inspite of overcrowding specially in the low-income areas (Lund et al., 2014).

Slums are often visualized to have poor living conditions, overcrowding, and lack of basic services, which creates stress and mental health challenges (Das & Ghosh, 2016). The social determinants of health (SDoH) framework has been used to study economic instability and food insecurity, and its impact on mental health especially among vulnerable populations like young women experiencing severe anxiety, depression, and suicidal thoughts (Patel et al., 2010). Hence, the TOPOWA study aims to explore the relationship between place and mental health in young women living in Kampala's slums with the help of qualitative methods such as focus groups and participatory photography. The study aims to identify neighborhood characteristics that contribute to mental distress and inform targeted interventions to improve mental health services and address the structural and social challenges.

1.3 Common mental disorder and its impact on socio-demographic

The mental health challenges faced by married women in slum areas for Bhubaneswar, who have come into the sight of the public health research due to its relation with socioeconomic hardships, family dynamics, and lack of access to healthcare. Thus, this study focuses upon a survey conducted among 362 women aged between 15-45 to diagnose common mental illnesses and their causes. The analysis were quite clear in saying that 22.1% of women were found to have mental disorders but 70% of them never caught for any medical help. Some of the key factors behind them pulling away from seeking mental health help were financial stress, lack of social interactions, irregular religious participation, family conflicts, and substance abuse by their own family members. Hence, it can be suggested that these factors must be kept in mind by the policy makers when rescue programmes are created and operated for them. Research by Das and Ghosh (2016) suggested that almost 20-25% of women living in the slums experience depression and anxiety. Financial insecurity is another factor that has been highlighted (Kishore et al. 2015), which is a major contributor to psychological distress. Additionally, (Verma et al. 2019) it was reported that women who participate in religious activities have better mental health.

1.4 The Impact of Intimate Partner Abuse on Slum Dwelling Women

The research talks about its study on the impact of violence by the intimate of pregnant women living in slums (Babak Moeini, Shayesteh Jahanfar). Almost about 456 women were surveyed using the Conflict Tactics Scale to assess IPV and the General Health Questionnaire-28 to examine the mental health. The results showed a strong impact of intimate partner violence whose results were seen through the Conflict Tactics Scale, presenting a strong link between intimate partner abuse and mental health disorders. Studies indicate that women experiencing such abuse may suffer from depression, PTSD and anxiety. Hence, there is an urgent need for policies and community based developmental programmes keeping the low income setting in mind.

Conclusion :

The mental health challenges faced by women in urban slums are deeply rooted in socio-economic inequalities, cultural stigmas, and systemic neglect. This study highlights how financial dependency, domestic violence, lack of safe spaces, and limited access to mental health resources contribute to the worsening of their mental well-being. The review of literature reinforces that social determinants, place-based disadvantages, intimate partner violence, and lack of policy implementation further aggravate these challenges.

To address these issues, a conceptual framework that integrates community-driven safe spaces, economic empowerment, policy enforcement, and healthcare accessibility is essential. Safe spaces serve as platforms for healing, support, and empowerment, allowing women to reclaim agency over their mental health. Additionally, strengthening policies such as the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, 2005, and the Mental Healthcare Act, 2017, along with targeted interventions, can significantly improve their psychological well-being. Future efforts should focus on holistic, intersectional strategies—including mental health literacy programs, financial independence initiatives, and stronger law enforcement against gender-based violence. A sustainable approach combining social, economic, and legal frameworks will create an inclusive and resilient environment where women in slums are heard, supported, and empowered to lead healthier lives.

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