

POLICY
BRIEF

IMPROVING ACCESS TO MATERNAL MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES IN GHANA



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KEY MESSAGES

Maternal mental health disorders are highly prevalent in Ghana, the most common form being perinatal depression across all levels of healthcare. Critical steps towards the provision of maternal mental health services include to:

- Promote the integration and synergy for the use of available resources at subnational levels to provide maternal mental health services.
- Increase advocacy efforts towards integration and improvement of maternal mental health services into routine perinatal care.
- Review the current Maternal and Child Health Record Book to include screening tools for maternal mental health for routine use.
- Align maternal mental health services to the Network of Practice (NoP) concept and its implementation arrangements.
- Review existing referral policies to clearly define care pathways for patients with maternal mental health disorder.
- Implement structured in-service training programmes, continuous professional development, and refresher training (on screening, treatment, counselling and psychotherapy, rehabilitation, referral, self-care models, etc) on maternal mental health for different cadre of healthcare providers.
- Create enabling care environments to promote family involvement and support during pregnancy, labour, delivery, and postpartum periods (labour companion)
- Provide adequate skills mix and equitable distribution of healthcare workers with capacity to deliver mental health services at all levels (Implement task-shifting policy where appropriate).
- Improve physical access to maternal mental health services through the provision of zonal or regional adequately equipped Mental Health Facilities nationwide.
- Include maternal mental health in training curricula to enhance capacity of trainee medical, nursing, midwives as well as postgraduate Residents in OBGYN and Psychiatry.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Introduction

The mental health of mothers and the physical development, especially nutrition, of their infants are inextricably linked. Maternal Mental Health (MMH) is a critical mediator between social adversity and poor infant growth. Unfortunately, the cost, availability and access of mental health services can be a significant hurdle for many patients, especially those who are more vulnerable, such as teenage mothers and patients without insurance¹. Certain societal and cultural norms may hinder individuals from seeking necessary mental health services. These beliefs have a great potential of stigmatizing mothers and their families who are diagnosed and require appropriate services. This can lead to a culture of shame leading to poor health-seeking behaviour patterns that subject affected to suffer in silence.

Though sufficient evidence exists on the adverse impact of maternal mental health disorders on the mother and infant, and its high prevalence in Ghana, there is little provision in the country's current healthcare system for early detection and a clearly defined referral pathways for effective management.

There is a need to integrate maternal mental health interventions within health systems from the level of the community and across all levels of healthcare.

The WHO has developed intervention guides^{2,3} that can be adapted and adopted in the integration of maternal mental health services into routine health systems for the provision of person-centered comprehensive care in the peripartum period to improve the wellbeing of women and children.

Key findings from the situational analysis for maternal mental health

- The high priority placed on addressing reproductive, maternal, newborn and child health care interventions to improve their outcomes has paid very little attention to the important contribution and negative impact of maternal mental health to the realisation of RMNCH outcomes in Ghana.
- Significant majority of healthcare workers providing maternity service lack adequate knowledge on the conditions, are unfamiliar with available screening tools for the disorder, screen for the disorder and lack capacity for its management.
- There are no clear-cut national policy or management guidelines for the screening, early detection, or management of MMHDs.
- There is gross limited access to maternal mental health care services in Ghana. Healthcare facilities lack the needed human resource, infrastructure and logistics including screening tools and consistent supply of medications for effective therapeutic interventions.
- There is a significant level of social stigmatisation at the community level against women who suffer MMHDs, and this negatively affects help and health seeking behaviour.

1 Adjorlolo S, Aziato L. Barriers to addressing mental health issues in childbearing women in Ghana. *Nurs Open*. 2020 Nov 1;7(6):1779–86

2 World Health Organization. Thinking healthy: a manual for psychosocial management of perinatal depression. 2015. <https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/WHO-MSD-MER-15.1>

3 Guide for integration of perinatal mental health in maternal and child health services. Geneva: World Health Organization; 2022.

Policy recommendations

- Develop and adapt relevant standards, protocols, and intervention guides for maternal mental health service delivery at all levels of care
- Develop monitoring and evaluation frameworks with specific indicators for the various levels of service delivery, aligned to global standards, and build capacity of Health Information Officers for timely data capture and reporting.

AREAS FOR CONSIDERATION	ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES	KEY STAKEHOLDERS
1. Education	Pre-service training for medical, midwifery & nursing students, physician assistants, Community Mental Health Officers, Postgraduates in OBGYN, Psychiatry, Clinical Psychology, Nursing and Midwifery/Nursing	Universities NMTCs Postgraduate Training Institutions
2. Training	Regular refresher in-service training for personnel every 1-2 years, across all levels of healthcare	Teaching Hospitals, GHS, Quasi Govt. Facilities, CHAG, Private Facilities
3. Screening Tools, Practices and Schedules	Constitute an expert committee of mental health and OBGYN professionals to identify for modification/adoption, or develop a simple user-friendly screening tool to identify common MMHDs for use in Ghana	Ministry of Health Mental Health Authority Ghana Health Service Health Partners
4. Healthcare Service and Structure	Adequate coverage of MMHD during ANC Classes/pregnancy school Ensuring the provision of compassionate care by all cadres providers during antenatal, intrapartum and postpartum periods. Expanding the delivery of evidence-based psychosocial therapies to pregnant and postpartum women through CHWs, lay counsellors and other frontline health workers	Ministry of Health Ghana Health Service Health Partners
5. Policy	National policy needed from the Ministry of Health on MMH integration into routine maternity care in Ghana across all levels of healthcare	Ministry of Health Mental Health Authority
6. Maternal Health Record Book	Needs review and modification to including screening tools for MMHD across all trimesters. Use as resource to record with MMH details. Use of visuals to explain MMHDs	Ministry of Health Ghana Health Service Health Partners

	Data on maternal mental health disorders included in DHIMS and reported at performance reviews of the GHS across all levels.	Ghana Health Service
7. Community Level Resources / MMDAs	Allocation of budgetary support for supporting women at risk, those affected and healthcare infrastructure to improve access	Ministry of Local Government
8. Public awareness and education for Stigma reduction	Community durbars, mass media, electronic, social media drives to improve awareness and reduce stigma	Media Health Partners Professional Societies Ghana Health Service Civil Society Organizations
9. Task sharing/ shifting	Training national service, traditional birth attendants, faith-based healers or traditional healers to conduct screening and referral	Ghana Health Service
10. Mobile Technology	Creation of patient-based self - screening mobile applications with appropriate pointers to seek care. Health professionals to develop content for education or screening on digital platforms.	Health and Development Partners Professional Societies
11. Improve access to services and medications	Mental health professionals (e.g. Psychiatrists, Psychologists, Nurses) should be assigned to all health facilities across the country. Siting of adequately staffed and equipped mental health referral centers across all ecological zones (or regions) of Ghana to improve access for patients with severe disorder requiring hospitalization and specialist care.	Ministry of Health Health Partners Mental Health Authority

Conclusion

Improving maternal mental healthcare in Ghana requires national prioritization, intentional high-level advocacy, improving physical access, building the capacity of the right skills-mix of professionals through a multi-sectoral collaboration to guarantee the delivery of a compassionate respectful client-centered integrated maternal mental healthcare routinely.

