

The background features a large circular graphic. The top half of the circle is light green, and the bottom half is light blue. Inside the circle are three stylized white figures. On the left, a figure with a mustache. In the center, a figure wearing a headscarf. On the right, a figure wearing a cap. They are all facing each other, suggesting a community or exchange. The central figure appears to be holding a laptop or tablet.

Mental Health is Foundational

An Adolescent Girls Community of Practice Learning Exchange

May 19, 2021

Moderated by Eva Roca, consultant to the Population Council

Today we'll be talking about:

- How we talk about mental health and what it means in our communities
- How mental health is related to social connections, livelihoods, and community characteristics
- What are some of the key mental health challenges girls and the people who support them (mentors, staff) face
- Strategies programs are using to address mental health in low-resource environments
- Innovative ways to measure aspects of mental health

Why should mental health be a key focus area for those who work with marginalized girls?



- Mental health a neglected, stigmatized area, yet with broad implications for well-being
- Adolescence is a transitional and formative time neurologically, socially
- Mental health is not just a biological issue or an individual one—social determinants are key drivers
- Those who are particularly affected by crisis are often people who were already on the margins, like the segments of girls many of these programs work with

Girls face multiple, overlapping challenges that are exacerbated during emergencies, posing challenges for mental health

Girls play at least 4 vital roles:



How is mental health foundational for programs for adolescent girls?



- Mental health is an issue you must address before you can build other assets effectively, not a luxury add-on
- Feeling depressed, anxious or stressed can impede the absorption of new information and skills
- Building girls' assets also helps support mental health and resilience

Introducing our Panel

Diana Bigby, Founder of the Fort Belknap Girl's Society (Fort Belknap Indian Reservation, Montana)

Kelly Hallman, IMAGEN (New York, New York)

Christina Mallie, Colors of Connection (Goma, Democratic Republic of Congo)

Rima Mourtada, Lebanese Community of Practice for Girls' Programming

Myriam Narcisse, Haiti Adolescent Girls Network (HAGN)

Anita Shankar, Global Trauma Project (Kenya)

What do we mean when we talk about mental health

“Mental health is a state of well-being in which an individual realizes his or her own abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and is able to make a contribution to his or her community.” (WHO)

- Includes who you are (individual factors), social connections (which have been constrained under COVID), and where you are (place/neighborhood, which for many has mattered more than ever during the pandemic)
- Often mental health is not discussed at all because of STIGMA

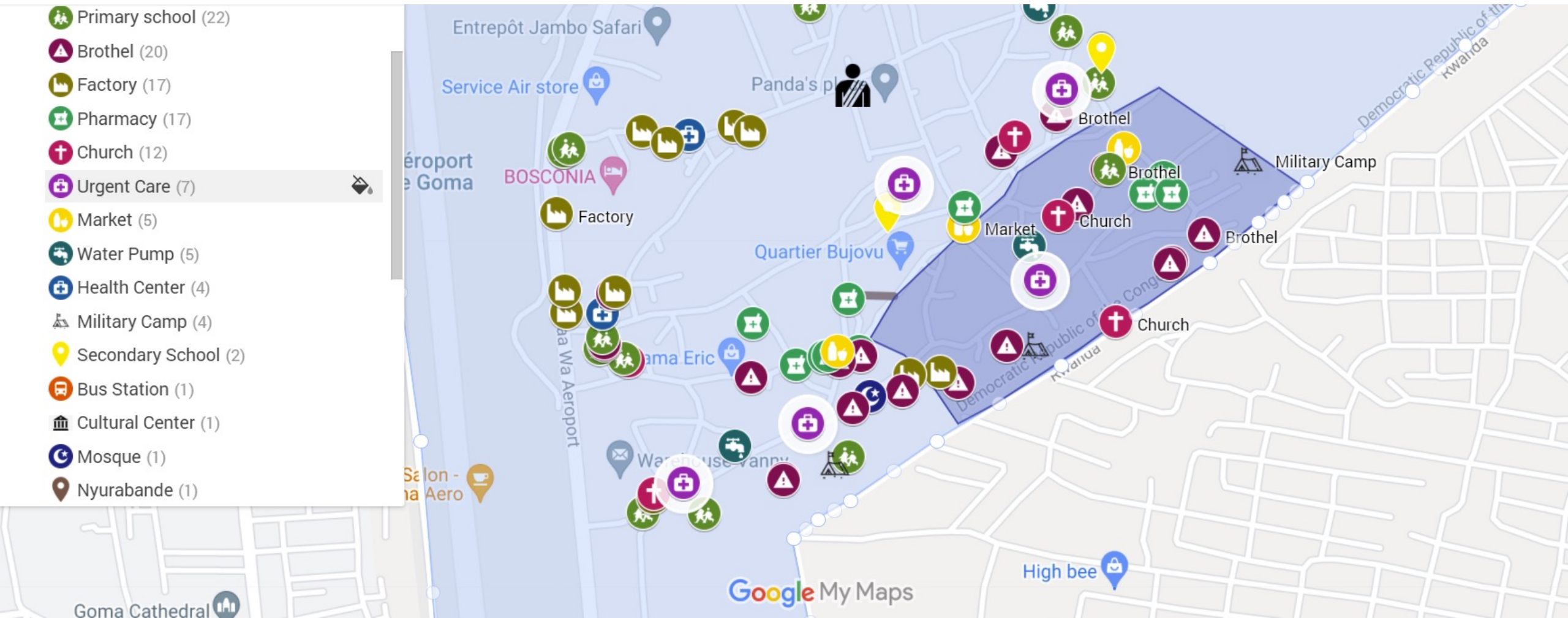
How COVID has exacerbated issues that impact mental health

- Social disconnection
- Economic impacts
- Violence

Mental Health is intimately entwined with social connection or lack of it

- COVID has meant losing social connections (disconnection, death)
- Close-knit communities hard hit by the loss of elders and traditional ways of mourning (Diana Bigby, Fort Belknap Reservation Montana)
- Tensions exacerbated in communities with low levels of social cohesion (refugee and host communities in Lebanon, Rima Mourtada)

Characteristics of places affect mental health



Detail from Community Resource Scan, Goma (DRC) by Colors of Connection (Christina Mallie)

Violence and Mental Health

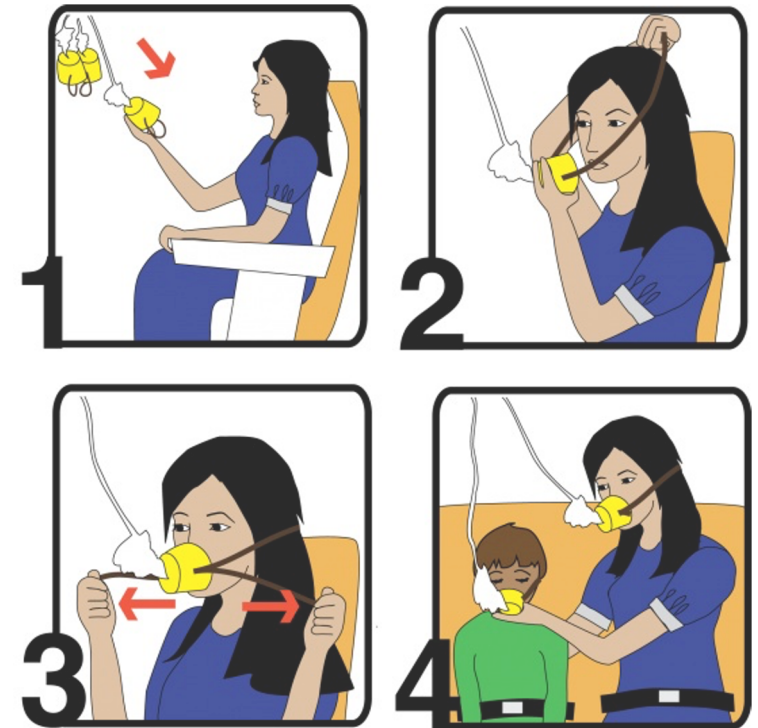
- Experiences of violence are strongly related to mental health. How has COVID increased girls' exposure to violence in the communities where you work?
- Even pre-COVID girls live with high levels of discrimination and violence (DRC)
- COVID increasing violence at home (Haiti)
- Economic stresses lead to violence at home (Lebanon)
- Using simple tools to learn about communities, pre- and post-COVID (Kenya)

What are some of the mental health challenges you are dealing with among the populations of girls you work with, mentors, staff?

- Discussion from panel:
 - Mothers in Lebanon
 - NGO mutual support via learning circles (Lebanon)
 - Challenges mentors face in Haiti

- Breakout room discussion:
(10 minutes)

How and when do mental health needs present themselves in girls/staff/mentors?
How do you identify needs—directly, indirectly?
What are you doing to address these needs?



Approaches for addressing mental health of girls, mentors, staff

- Solutions appropriate for low-resource environments
- Individual and systemic solutions
- Some tools available here: [Creative Assets Toolkit](#)

Identifying and expressing emotions



Arts-based approaches







Yoga and Other Physical Activities



Faces covered for privacy

Other key strategies

- Providing safe spaces
- Activities that encourage sharing personal experiences
- Sessions on managing stress and anger
- Linking participants to needed services
- Understanding girls' connections to their communities and its resources



Innovations in measuring aspects of mental health



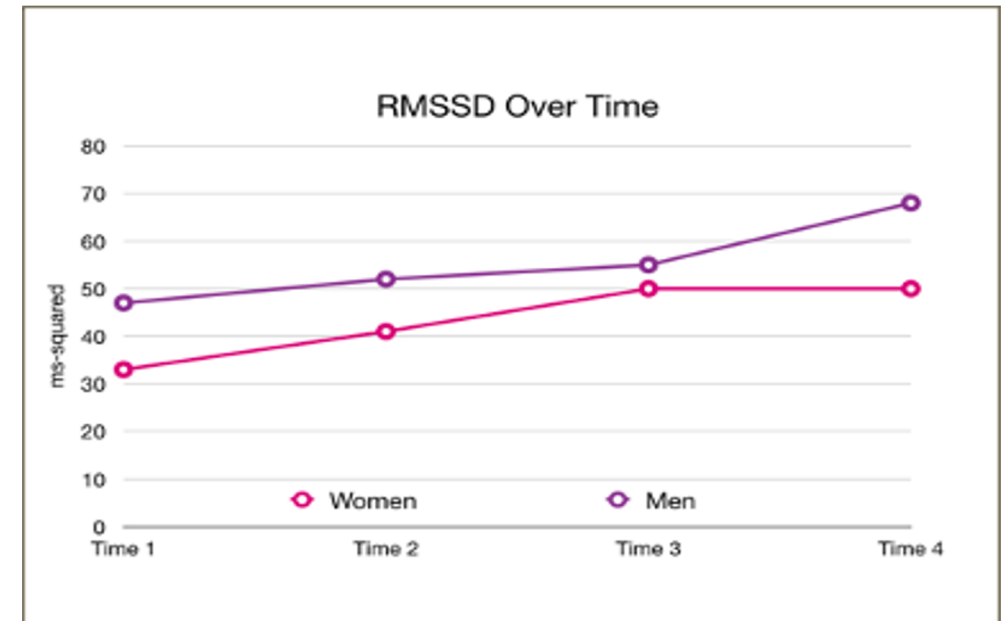
Language barriers, translation concerns, cultural specificity of symptoms, and difficulties reporting on emotion (which happens in trauma) all suggest need for augmenting self-report with biological measures.

- Sympathetic Nervous System “Gas Pedal”

- Stress, fight/flight, alertness.
 - Too low or too high is bad.
 - Too low = shut down.
 - Too high = very stressed

- Parasympathetic Nervous System “Brakes”

- Emotion Regulation, Coping, Stress Recovery
 - Social connection
 - Self awareness



Statistically significant improvement of HRV from Time 1 to Time 2 to Time 3 to Time 4

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- **Assuming you had more resources and more time, and you can do more in person, what do you want to do next?**
 - Capacity building in mental health support for staff and mentors
 - Incorporating more indigenous practices and providing cultural resources for mental health support
 - Resume in-person training
 - Focus on strengths, not deficits; incorporate a component of joy into programming

Summary

- Lessons from a range of environments, working with different segments of girls
- COVID has only compounded challenges that already disproportionately burdened girls
- Linkages between mental health and health, social, economic, and environmental determinants—critical to address directly, in culturally-relevant ways, while also working on broader determinants of mental health
- Girls need programs that help them thrive as who they are, where they are and mentors and staff must be properly supported to deliver these programs
- Often a focus on individual solutions, but have to recognize and fight for addressing root causes like poverty, inequality, poor housing, neighborhoods that work for all

Thank you



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