

Editors' Introduction

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"If you want to know more about femininity, enquire from your own experiences of life, or turn to the poets, or wait until science can give you deeper and more coherent information."
(Sigmund Freud, 1933)

Since the 1960s there has been a rapid increase in research literature pertaining to women. This was a departure from previous conceptualisations of women's mental health. Seiden (1976) referred to this as a 'revolution' in women's studies "unequaled in any other field related to psychiatry".

Showalter (1987) examined the history of women, madness, and English culture. Darwinian ideas influenced psychiatric thought from the late 19th century to World War I. One of the foremost early British psychiatrists, Henry Maudsley (1835–1918), embraced the view that biology determined destiny; he insisted that "there is sex in mind as clearly as there is sex in body". Indeed, female physiology marked women "for very different offices in life from those of men". Showalter demonstrates how theories of sexual differences elaborated by Darwinian science were "incorporated into a highly prescriptive late Victorian psychology of women." Rigidity towards sex differences and gender roles proved surprisingly persistent, even into the 1970s: Showalter is able to quote from a 1972 textbook on psychiatry, recommending psychosurgery for a depressed woman "who may owe her illness to a psychopathic husband who cannot change and will not accept treatment". British psychiatry has been slow to acknowledge the relevance of specific studies of female psychology and psychopathology to increasing understanding of mental disorder (in both women and men).

In contrast, the American psychiatric establishment has been more successful in assimilating, and distributing, the information gained through this research. In 1972, the American Psychiatric Association set up a task force on women. Over the following decade, the *American Journal of Psychiatry* published two special sections dealing with women's issues. In one of these sections, Benedek (1981) commented that the previous eight years had seen major changes in beliefs and expectations as to women's and men's roles in society which would need to be incorporated

into psychiatric education and treatment. Although women were the major mental health service consumers, their special needs had yet to be understood and accounted for in service planning. The hope in publishing a section devoted to women was to provide enlightenment, revitalise attitudes and attract a continuous flow of research contributions dealing with the 'new psychology of women'.

Over the last 30 years, attitudes have altered significantly. Gender roles and biological sex differences are no longer equated. There is a plethora of research into sex difference in mental illnesses and the way in which social expectation and gender roles affect mental health of both men and women. Yet women are still more likely than men to need psychiatric help, and bear the increasing burden of community care of the mentally ill.

It is timely, therefore, to examine aspects of psychiatric disorder in women. This supplement represents a selection of papers from the first International Conference on Women and Mental Health, held at the Institute of Psychiatry, London. The conference provided a forum in which the particular mental health needs of women could be discussed in a multidisciplinary setting.

The supplement brings together reviews and current research on topics relating to women and mental health, ranging from a psychoanalytic view of women's psychology/psychopathology, a sociological perspective on women and crime, and psychiatric investigations into mental illness in women and its impact on women carers in the community.

The debate on mental health issues for women continues. We hope that this collection of papers will stimulate yet more discussion and research. The interest generated by the inaugural conference has been maintained – the second International Women and Mental Health Conference and the Conference on Women and Substance Abuse were both held at the Institute of Psychiatry in March 1991.

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