



# 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:

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- 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?

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- 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?

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- 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

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**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

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“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

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- Social disconnection
- Economic impacts
- Violence

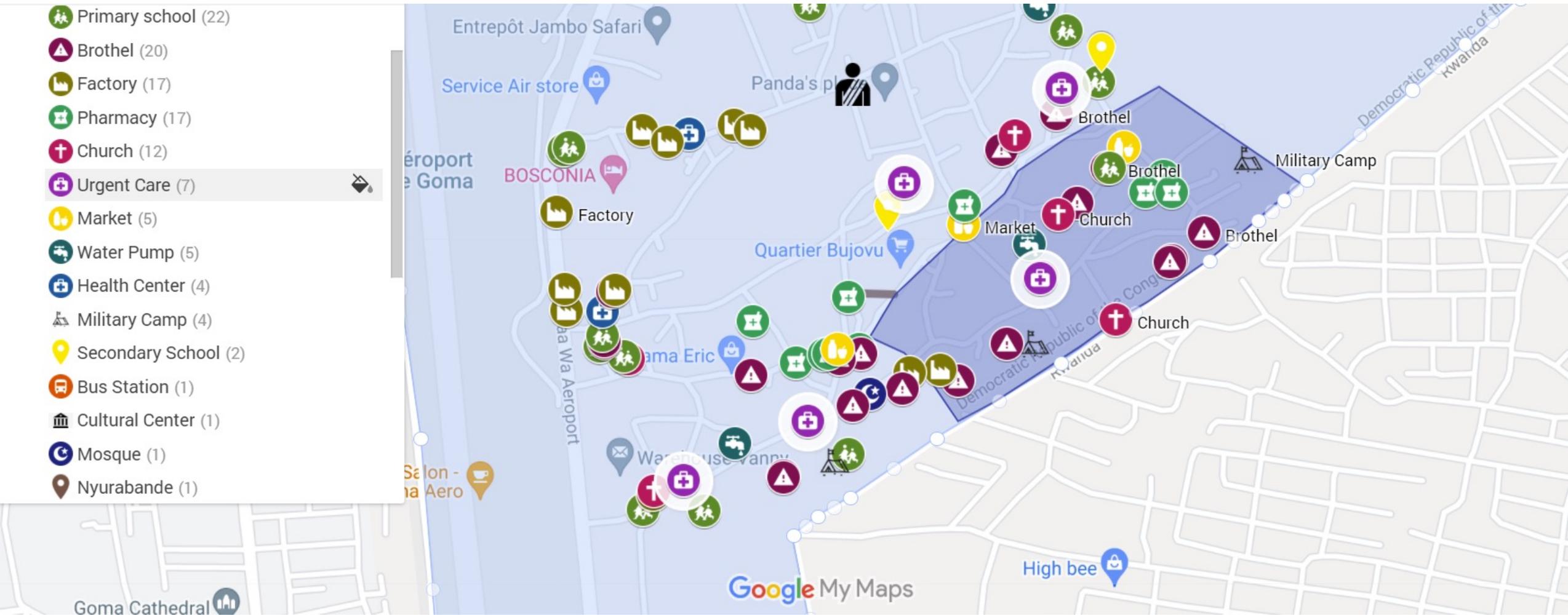
# Mental Health is intimately entwined with social connection or lack of it

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- 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

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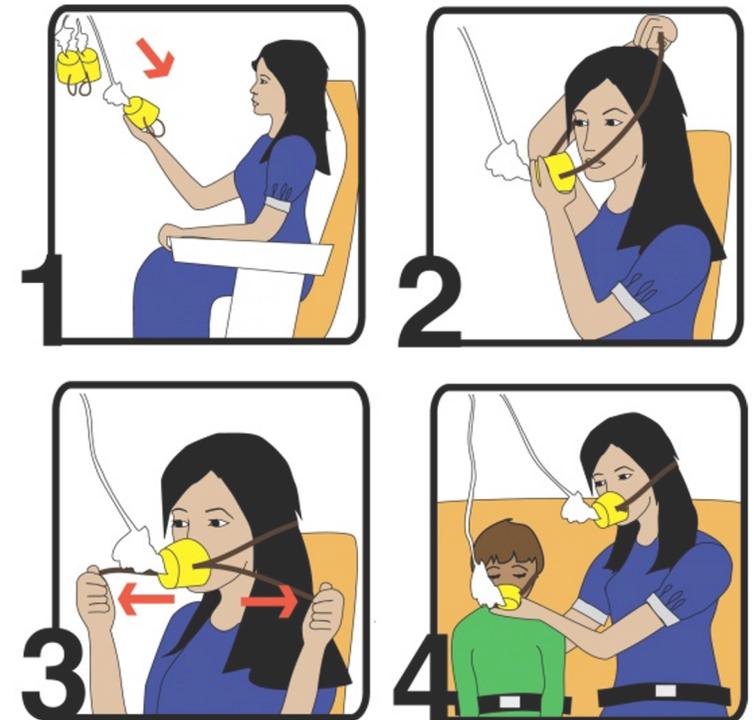
- Experiences of violence are strongly related to mental health. How has COVID increased girls' exposure to violence in the communities where you work?
- Even pre-COVID girls live with high levels of discrimination and violence (DRC)
- COVID increasing violence at home (Haiti)
- Economic stresses lead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



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# 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

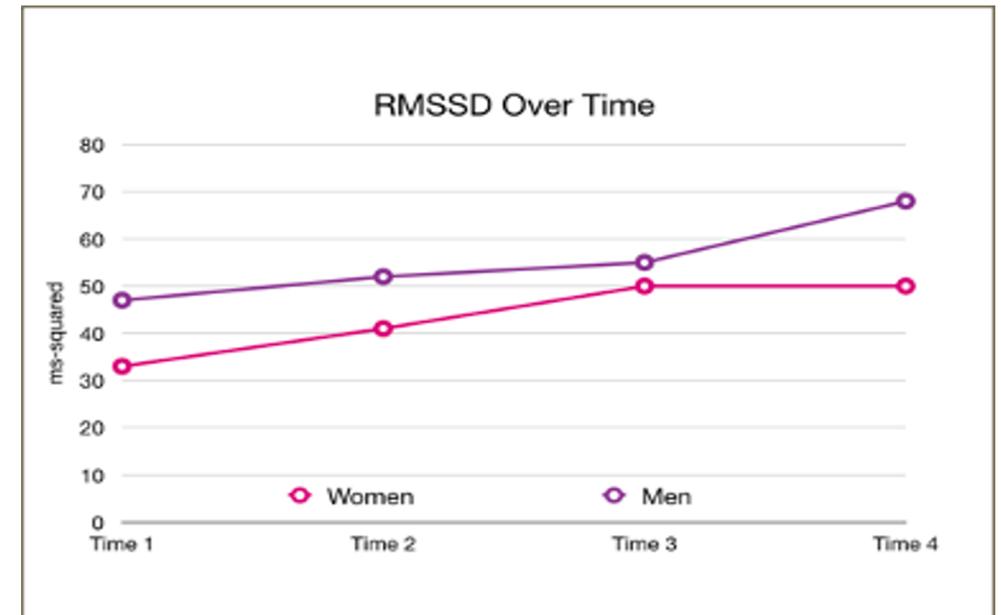


# Innovations in measuring aspects of mental health



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

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- 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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