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Psychosocial Empowerment Group Creation and Implementation Among Malawi Women

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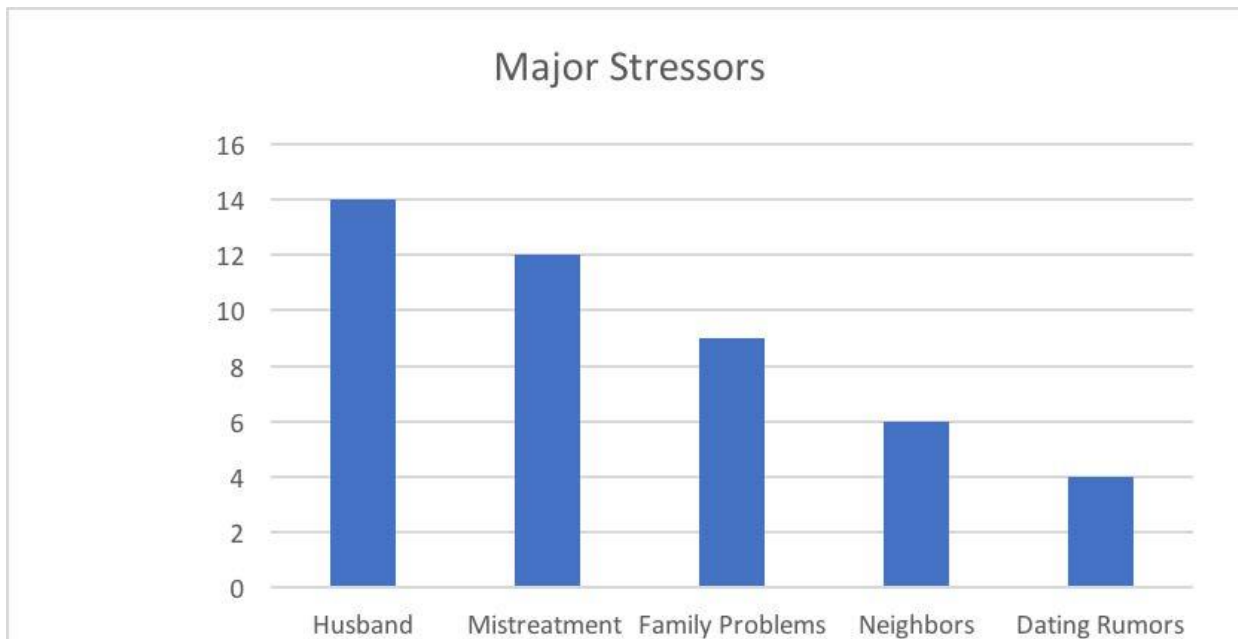
Research has shown that most women in Malawi will experience some form of trauma or adversity in their lifetime, and that such adversity can increase rates of mental illness and instability by as much as 15-20% (Saxena, 2017). Simple psychosocial groups and trainings have been shown to increase psychological resilience and prevent and/or heal mental instability. The term psychological resilience is defined as the way a person adapts well in the face of hard times, adversity, trauma, tragedy, or stress. Resilience can be taught through a few simple skills. The goal of this project was to get a better understanding of the psychological resilience of women at SAFI and then to teach them a few behaviors, actions, and skills that could possibly increase their resiliency.

I worked with Immaculate Huwa, a SAFI (The School of Agriculture for Family Independence) staff member, and started our project by interviewing all the female students at SAFI. Our survey asked questions on the five skills we were going to train on; self-awareness, stressmanagement, self-compassion, communication, and setting healthy boundaries. These questions were designed to gauge what the women already knew about these topics, their different experiences in each topic, and how they utilized these skills in their daily life. After interviewing 31 students, we held a two and half hour training on Sunday May 20th, 2018. This training focused on all the topics but heavily emphasized communication and stress-management—the two skills the women wanted to learn most about. After the students left campus Imma and I traveled out to graduate families. We interviewed the female graduate and the women in the nearby community and then held a brief training on stress-management and communication (the 2 skills we identified were most pertinent and needed).

Our key findings from interviews and implementation were that first 2/5 of the sections were identified as most important/vital to mental health and success of women at SAFI: stressmanagement and communication; 100% of women viewed communication as important for relationships and almost half said they utilize communication as a means to alleviate stress. Still when asked how they could improve communication, 94% of women said there is a problem with gossiping and inciting words among SAFI women. 2/3 of the women said they felt the women at SAFI need to learn more about proper communication skills.

Implementation of our psychosocial training that taught simple stress-management and communication skills was very effective in giving the women resources and tools to improve such problems. Women had great discussions and helped each other find healthy solutions to problems. One woman said, “My situation was very similar to those we discussed in the case studies and discussion. I feel like I am being assisted and learned two or things I can use to better my situation. Please do this training again with women in my home community.”

Early on, we asked the women three stress-related questions: what is stress, how often do you experience stress, and what is an example of a stressor in your daily life? 39% of women experience stress on a daily basis, and 23% experience stress more than once a day. Our data suggests that this is not minor stress, but is an extreme feeling that occurs when you are hurt deeply and someone does something negative to you. The fact that they were experiencing this emotion frequently was somewhat concerning. When asked to give a situation where they experienced major stress, many of the women spoke of their husbands and hinted at “mistreatment” or abuse (40%). The distribution of answers to this question of major stressors can be seen in the graph below.



One woman said, “Yes, my husband causes the stress. He mistreats me, things are not good economically. We are very poor. In terms of home management my husband feels it is his duty to manage the home. I always ask God, ‘Are you sure you created me to be in this estate, to be poor? For my husband to mistreat me?’” Another said, “When I got married I thought I loved him but I was misguided. I always think, ‘Why always me, why this, I am so scared.’ I would like to stop what has been happening to me.”

Group implementation was effective but resilience cannot be fully achieved among Malawi women until the systemic barriers of abuse and mistreatment are removed from their lives. Moving forward, we hope to alter the curriculum to be taught to the men at SAFI separately. Hopefully teaching the men to manage their stress effectively and communicate more effectively will be a small step in the right direction to changing the abuse cycle

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