

Bombay Begums—A treasure for social guidance films on determinants of women's mental health

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ABSTRACT

A woman's health should reach beyond the narrow perspective of maternal and reproductive health and should encompass physical as well as mental health across the life cycle. The focus should be shifted to a broader, social, legal, and economic factors rather than just immersing on lifestyle and individual factors. Recognition of mental health issues among women, education, training, and interventions at various levels would contribute to the improvement of mental health issues among women.

Keywords: Mental disorder, physical health, women's mental health

Introduction

Women and men experience and respond to stress in varied and disparate fashion,^[1] and women are known to endure more chronic stressors than men throughout their lifetimes.^[2] Even amongst women, those who are in employment report lesser distress/stress through situations, while those remaining in caregiving roles report greater stress and dysfunction.^[2]

Susceptibility to infectious diseases, hypertension, and drug abuse is generally observed to be higher in men. Conditions such as autoimmune diseases, chronic pain, depression, and anxiety disorders are relatively more prevalent amongst women.^[3]

Different genders experience stress in a different way. Men feel depersonalized, whereas women experience emotional exhaustion. An interplay of biological and social health determinants like inequality, social segregation, gender stereotypes, and autonomy leads to greater risk for psychological problems.^[4]

Sex and gender function as important determinants of health and well-being outcomes alongside impacting healthcare access and social supports. Budding healthcare professionals, those from psychiatry psychology, public health, and social work backgrounds, must also learn these determinants and their influence to develop competencies. Multiple methods of imparting such learning/training can deliver an understanding of such nuances, for example, case-based discussions, simulated role plays, and lived experience narratives amongst others. Each of these has its own limitations chiefly in terms of informed consent, in the case of real narratives, limitations in relatability, and the portrayal of nuanced situations.

This void of an impactful and meaningful training method can to a large extent, be overcome by utilizing short clips or films based

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Received: 12-04-2023
Accepted: 06-07-2023

Revised: 03-07-2023
Published: 21-12-2023

Access this article online

Quick Response Code:



Website:
<http://journals.lww.com/JFMPC>

DOI:
10.4103/jfmprc.jfmprc_637_23

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How to cite this article: Abhilasha P, Philip S, Bora N, Jamir L, Ghosh N. Bombay Begums—A treasure for social guidance films on determinants of women's mental health. J Family Med Prim Care 2023;12:3024-7.

on such themes. Referred to as social guidance films, these focus on social issues of concern and convey pertinent messages within 15-20 minutes. Relatedly, trigger films are designed as short video vignettes to present specific themes, which may include lived experiences or social practice issues. The short videos provide triggers for drawn-out deliberations on responses in such situations from multiple vantages such as protagonists and bystanders.^[5]

These short films or clips provide rich, relatable, incredibly engaging, acceptable, and cost-effective means of discussing and sensitizing trainees and laypersons alike through guided and themed discussions.^[6] Such depictions through popular figures can help to mainstream otherwise side-lined discussions about lived experiences.

Bombay Begums is a six-episode web series created by Bornila Chatterjee and Alankrita Shrivastava. Available on the popular OTT over the top Platform, Netflix, in Hindi and English (audio tracks and subtitles), it portrays the intersecting life stories of five women: showcasing their grit through adversity and difficult circumstances. It also highlights the impact such situations have on their physical and mental health. It was nominated for best web series at the Indian Film and Television Awards 2021. Actors have also won many laurels such as Asian Academy Creative Awards 2021 and Filmfare OTT Awards 2021 for Best Actress in a Supporting Role both by Amruta Subhash and Indian Film and Television Awards 2022 for Best Supporting Actress in a Series by Aadhya Anand.

Bombay Begums focuses on ladies in Mumbai who interact with one another across social classes. Rani (played by Pooja Bhatt), the CEO of a reputable bank, finds herself in a messy predicament after her stepson hits a little boy on the street while driving intoxicated. Amruta Subhash plays Lily, a dancer, and commercial sex worker, the mother of the victim who seeks compensation from Rani. Not desiring to continue sex work, Lily works out a job role with Rani. Her attempts at discontinuing sex work are resisted by a local politician who thwarts her and her colleagues' attempts at shared group employment. Two other women, Fatima (Sahana Goswami), and Ayesha (Plabita Borthakur), also connect as employees in the bank headed by Rani. Fatima and her husband are shown attempting to deal with infertility while Ayesha joins as a rookie. Lastly, the series also depicts the travails of a teenager, Shai, (Aadhya Anand), who is Rani's stepdaughter.

Materials and Methods

Authors examined this web series to identify the issues portrayed, the episodes were identified which could best portray such issues as social guidance or trigger films.

Discussion

As shown in Table 1, many women's health and well-being issues are portrayed masterfully including workplace sexual harassment, infertility, pregnancy loss, substance use and experimentation,

Table 1: The segments so identified - alongside crisp descriptions of the clips

Issue depicted	Best depicted in episode	Brief description of the depiction	Best shown by character	Mental health consequence or representation depicted	Learning for MHP
Workplace harassment	In episodes 3 and 4	Ayesha was sexually harassed by Deepak who was an authority in the bank. She refused to fill a case as she was not willing to endanger her career. Rani also faced harassment by her mentor.	Ayesha	Trauma, agitation, lack of interest, isolation, negative impact on confidence and self-esteem, sleep disorders	Struggles of women at the workplace are qualitatively different. Women face objectification and sometimes may even have to engage in physical intimacy to rise through glass ceilings.
Menopausal symptoms	Episode 1	Rani trying to hide her hot flashes as she thinks she would get judged by people around who would demean her if they get any chance	Rani	Hot flashes, irritability, low mood, low self-esteem, constant feeling of being judged.	Perimenopausal mental health challenges
Infertility, assisted reproduction, and pregnancy loss	Episode 1	As a couple with infertility Fathima and husband—are shown navigating assisted reproduction, she undergoes hormonal and IVF treatments and she finally conceive. The clip shows her going through miscarriage (massive loss of blood).	Fathima	Depression, adjustment issues with husband postmarriage	Infertility counseling
Menarche and menstruation	Menarche and menstruation-3	Shai attempts to turn a boy's attention toward her by pretending to be on her period, by expressing sexual maturity.	Shai	Body image issues, low self-esteem, depression, anxiety.	Taboos and evolving thought process of a young child such as conflating attractiveness with sexual maturity.
Sexual experimentation	In episode 3	While being in a heterosexual relationship Ayesha is shown to have homosexual attraction for a lady she meets in a bar.	Ayesha	Internal stigma, exclusion experiences, social withdrawal, isolation can lead to depression and adjustment disorders and body image issues.	One can learn about the added biases discrimination and stereotyping muted out to gender and sexual minorities.

consent in sex work, menstruation, gender-related stigmatization, and discrimination experiences.

Gender inequities remain prevalent at the workplace. These are frequently associated with sexual harassment or gender-based harassment at the workplace.^[7] No robust estimates exist of the magnitude of the problem—the 2004 national commission for women report documents that 47% of women face sexual harassment at their workplace—only 4% report it to authorities and only 1.4% reports the matter to law enforcement.^[8] Such gender-based harassment adversely affects productivity, careers, motivation and retention in employment, etc., alongside mental health challenges such as post-traumatic stress, depression, and anxiety disorders.^[9] The series sensitively depicts how sometimes women too can be a part of this problem or its redressal.

Aspects of menstruation too have been represented skillfully. A teenager's journey through puberty including menarche and its impact on perceived attractiveness and related self-esteem sets apart Aadhya Anand's on-screen role as Shai.

Menopause too is portrayed through Pooja Bhatt's on-screen role as Rani. The screen role depicts her developing hot flushes, her initial denial, her fears of being perceived as weak and inept as a result of aging inform viewers of the myriad challenges facing perimenopausal women. Both menarche and menopause represent periods of emotional upheavals sometimes contextualized and at other times complicated by psychological ill health such as irritability, mood fluctuations, role stresses, self-devaluation, and body image issues, amongst others.^[10]

These are periods of heightened vulnerability for women to develop mental health conditions. Secondary analysis of the national survey and household survey IV and V reported a prevalence of 7.3% for miscarriages amongst women in India.^[11] Almost 50% of the women enduring a pregnancy loss develop adverse psychological outcomes such as depression and post-traumatic stress disorders.^[12] The travails of pregnant Fatima waking up to find herself having a massive bleed in the middle of the night. Positive and negative responses of the couple and the family support system reveal the many nuances surrounding pregnancy loss such as superstitious foreboding, etc.

Conclusion

Bombay Begums thus provides ample scope for incorporation as social guidance or trigger films for educating budding professionals and laypersons alike about the determinants of women's health and mental health. Many difficult and lesser-understood issues are brought to the fore through masterful screenplay and performances.

However, the series has also been critiqued for seeming to promote adolescent drug use and experimentation. This adolescent, Shai, is healing from early attachment disturbances after losing her biological mother the entire series is papered by

narrations by this adolescent who takes this difficult journey to emotionally bonding with her stepmother. During this journey, experimentation with drugs has been shown as a coping strategy.^[13] Critics apprehend the deleterious effects of the focused portrayals of body image distortions, negative coping patterns, family dysfunctions, and communication breakdowns as stereotyping adolescent behaviour. Some limitations to this examination need to be stated. The pre-eminence of the determinants identified and discussed here is based on the author's experiences and perspectives, which may not have concurrence with every reader. Also, most sections selected depict multiple health determinants, but one has been selected by the authors, which come across as arbitrary. Authors could not undertake a comparative analysis with other media depictions of such determinants. Authors would thus find it difficult to explain why this series was selected for such an examination.

The series is available and accessible to viewers and renders the depictions by professional actors on very important albeit somewhat neglected determinants of women's' mental and physical health. Healthcare professional educators would also note how more than one issue may be highlighted in the same segments while also picturing nuances and intersections of vulnerabilities.

Educators especially in low- and middle-income settings ought to utilize such trigger films and guidance films more often. One may even consider adjuvant exercises such as perspective taking, guided reflections, and repatriation interactions to enhance learning outcomes. These exercises bring experiential learning close to the adult learner. Women hold up half the sky, but the horizon for mental health for them is different as compared to men. Biological and sociological factors coupled with oppressive systems embedded in patriarchy also put them at a significant disadvantage in availing care and concern and affecting the outcomes. Collaborative approach at social, political, economic, and legal levels can bring in change in lives of Indian women. The primary caregivers should be well aware of the major mental problems affecting women, enquire about the mental health issues affecting them, and provide the most appropriate support and intervention as well as education to the community on issues in relation to the mental health of women.

Financial support and sponsorship

Nil.

Conflicts of interest

There are no conflicts of interest.

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