

Re: Silent Epidemic of Depression in Women in the Middle East and North Africa Region

رد : وباء الاكتئاب الصامت لدى المرأة في منطقة الشرق الأوسط وشمال أفريقيا

To the Editor,

The review paper by Liyam Eloul, Amaal Ambusaidi and Samir Al-Adawi 'Silent Epidemic of Depression in Women in the Middle East and North Africa Region' published in the April 2009 issue of SQUMJ¹ is an interesting discussion of depression in women in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. The authors provided a balanced and well articulated discussion of the factors that may play a role in the development of depression in women such as the higher exposure to postpartum depression, changing roles of women due to modernisation and some local sociocultural practices, not related to Islam as a religion. However, it is important to pay attention to the fact that modernisation has not only affected the mental health of women in the MENA region. Rather, modernisation and changing family life have also influenced women's mental health in Western countries as evidenced by the increased depression rates for women.^{2,3,4} In addition, social and cultural forces in the region and elsewhere have played a role in the increasing depression rates for men, too.

Several studies have shown that there is an increased risk of depression in younger cohorts of both men and women.^{5,2} In addition, the prevalence rates of depression have actually increased for both genders of younger cohorts.² Data showed that they are experiencing an earlier onset of depression, although sex ratios were indistinguishable.² Despite the increase in depression rates, men's lower reported rates of depression compared to women may not be an accurate estimation of the prevalence of depression among men. Therefore, rates of depression for men may be much higher than what is reported in different studies. Two important factors may be related to the lower reported depression rates for men.⁶

The low reported rates of depression may be an indication of the insensitivity of the diagnostic tools utilised to measure depression.⁷ Diagnostic measures focus on the expression of emotion and the identification of the self-inefficiencies in the persons diagnosed with depression, all of which are in strong agreement with the feminine qualities of self-expression, as opposed to men's who, when depressed, are three times more likely to display inappropriate anger outbursts compared to women.⁸ These anger outbursts are supposed to be the result of unexpressed emotions.⁹

Another reason for the low reported rates of depression of men appears to be their unwillingness to seek mental health services when needed, especially in mild-moderate depression.¹⁰ Admitting signs of mental illness is considered to be against the legends of masculinity that place special importance on ignoring symptoms of sickness in the hope that symptoms will go away.¹¹ This is because masculinity requires men to demonstrate to people that they are "tough" and that they exemplify "manhood".¹² That is why future studies have to be extra sensitive when reporting on men's depression given the complexity of the interaction between the cultural and psychological dimensions of depression.

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