

It is everybody's right to be heard: Social exclusion and mental health

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ABSTRACT

Aim: This paper aims to reveal the essence of social exclusion and examine its impact on mental health.

Materials and Methods: The authors used interpretive research paradigm, integrative anthropological approach, and hermeneutical approach.

The data collection was carried out using PubMed, Scopus, Web of Science, Google Scholar databases. Research papers were identified according to search terms: "social exclusion", "social inclusion", "mental health", "well-being", "discrimination", "prejudice", "social injustice", "racial discrimination", "poverty", "values", "Other", "belonging", "depression", "anxiety", "anger", "hopelessness", "intersectionality". From the entire available literature, 65 sources were selected according to specified criteria, such as "an intersectional approach to social exclusion" and "the negative consequences of social exclusion through the lens of mental health and well-being". A limitation was that the authors used only sources available in English during study selection due to the time-saving factor, as well as human resources factor.

Conclusions: Tackling social exclusion, which has a detrimental effect on physical and mental health and undermines human dignity, requires concerted efforts at all levels of society. Today, it is especially important to develop a long-term transdisciplinary strategy, which addresses the multiple and overlapping disadvantages experienced by excluded groups. Social institutions, which guide people's behavior through norms, are key to strategies for combating social exclusion. It is necessary to consider the actual mechanisms at work in terms of social exclusion, as well as interventions at the level of groups or individuals. Addressing discriminatory behavior alone or one type of inequality can lead to certain changes, however, these changes will not be decisive for underprivileged groups, as quite often negative stereotypes and prejudices, which impede social inclusion, are expressed in subtle ways. At the same time, addressing values that underlie exclusion and discrimination may be more effective and have more far-reaching consequences. The goal and outcome of these extensive responses to the acute problem of social exclusion is to create a global inclusive society where all voices are heard, and the voice of the "Other" is as significant as yours.

KEY WORDS: social exclusion, mental health, well-being, discrimination, social injustice

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INTRODUCTION

Many spears have been broken in the struggle for human equality. This struggle has lasted for hundreds of years, and each epoch has responded to it in its own way. For example, the United States Declaration of Independence claims: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness" [1]. According to the Constitution of Ukraine, "All people are free and equal in their dignity and rights. Human rights and freedoms are inalienable and inviolable" [2]. We should remember that "equality per se does not exist in nature; it is rather a mental construct that arises within the world of culture, not within the world of nature. A long-lasting struggle for equality contributed to a significant improvement in the

living standards of people and their happiness, although, like any ideal, full equality is unattainable. Today, however, the denial of the need for equal rights is considered *mauvais ton*. The contemporary world declares that all people are equal (or should be)" [3].

Today, on the way to reaching the closely interrelated Sustainable Development Goals, efforts to reduce all forms of inequality in society is a priority. However, on this pathway to a better future, the global society faces a number of challenges. Still now, inequalities based on income, sex, age, disability, sexual orientation, race, class, ethnicity, religion, etc. continue to exist across the world, which "threatens long-term social and economic development, harms poverty reduction, and destroys people's sense of fulfillment and self-worth. This, in turn, can breed crime, disease and environmental degradation" [4].

The concept of inequality is closely related to the concept of social exclusion [5]. Inequality in society is dangerous because it further marginalizes and discriminates against underprivileged groups, which ultimately leads to social exclusion, thereby further increasing inequality. Such inequality affects groups of people. It is a multifaceted phenomenon that includes social, economic, and political forms of exclusion. Social exclusion leads to unequal access to the opportunities and services needed to live a dignified and happy life. Even the most basic means of survival may become inaccessible, not to mention the freedom to express one's opinion and influence the life of society [6].

Combating social exclusion goes beyond overcoming poverty and reducing inequality. It must challenge ethnic, racial, gender, etc. discrimination by considering representatives of socially excluded groups at the intersection of their identities. According to the latest estimates, between 2.33 and 2.43 billion people (roughly 32 per cent of the global population) are at high risk of social exclusion [7]. The concept of social exclusion, although often used as a synonym for poverty and inequality, encompasses a broader dimension of the social world. It is associated with a specific understanding that varies depending on cultural norms, values, politics, national contexts, etc. Social exclusion is not only the result of the interaction of disadvantageous factors, but also a process by which individuals or groups become or remain systematically disadvantaged [8]. M. Niño-Zarazúa emphasizes that "women, children, and poor men are the primary groups at risk of exclusion, representing 85% to 90% of excluded population... Other vulnerable groups include members of the LGBTI community, indigenous people, Afro-descendants, and religious minorities. These groups face heightened exclusion because of their identities, circumstances and socioeconomic disadvantages" [9]. The situation is further aggravated when multiple identities come into play. These identities often intersect and reinforce exclusion, and their bearers are subject to increased negative attitudes and discrimination resulting from multiple identities. Social exclusion undermines the foundations of any society negatively impacting all areas of human life; it harms mental health, triggering pain, cognitive impairment, and long-term disorders [10]. Social exclusion is not just a personal problem; it is a societal challenge with far-reaching consequences for human well-being and global future.

AIM

This paper aims to reveal the essence of social exclusion and examine its impact on mental health.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The authors used interpretive research paradigm, integrative anthropological approach, and hermeneutical approach.

The data collection was carried out using PubMed, Scopus, Web of Science, Google Scholar databases. Research papers were identified according to search terms: "social exclusion", "social inclusion", "mental health", "well-being", "discrimination", "prejudice", "social injustice", "racial discrimination", "poverty", "values", "Other", "belonging", "depression", "anxiety", "anger", "hopelessness", "intersectionality".

From the entire available literature, 65 sources were selected according to specified criteria, such as "an intersectional approach to social exclusion" and "the negative consequences of social exclusion through the lens of mental health and well-being". A limitation was that the authors used only sources available in English during study selection due to the time-saving factor, as well as human resources factor.

ETHICS

This review article is based on an analysis of publicly available scientific data published in peer-reviewed journals, clinical guidelines and databases. No patient-identifying data was used during the work, nor was there a need to obtain approval from an ethics committee, as the study did not include new clinical interventions or initial collection of patient information.

REVIEW AND DISCUSSION

The exclusion discourse emerged in the 1960s in France, where it resonated with the national ideology of republicanism and refers to a rupture of the "social bonds" or "solidarity" [11]. This discourse became the focus of social policy in the 1980s-2000s in EU, the United Kingdom, and Australia. "The social exclusion concept is regarded as a multi-dimensional process that indicates inequality at different levels, including access to resources, capabilities, and rights. The solution to the social exclusion challenge is the inclusion of individuals into society, which is referred to as social inclusion" [12]. While the concept initially focused on economic exclusion, it is necessary to take into account a whole range of issues beyond purely economic parameters.

Indeed, social exclusion describes a number of structures and dynamic processes of inequality among different groups in society. It refers to the inability of certain groups to participate fully in the life of society because, within the framework of structural inequalities, these groups are denied access or have very limited access to economic, political, social, and cultural resources [13]. Such restrictions are determined by social class,

educational level, race, ethnicity, religion, gender, disability, age, minority status, migration status, economic status, HIV positivity, identity and even individual history, that is, anything that distinguishes members of a given group from the mainstream and from what is considered the norm in this or that society. Such ideas vary from epoch to epoch and from culture to culture. This was not always the case for underprivileged groups only. Sometimes, during revolutionary transformations, former upper classes were subjected to downward social mobility being forcibly stripped of their privileges and pushed to the margins of history, thereby being subjected to forced social exclusion. But what remains unchanged is the existence of groups that are being targeted for exclusion from the grand narrative.

Moreover, it is not simply an exclusion due to a lack of resources on the part of a certain group; it is a deliberate marginalization of a group that is denied access not only to the benefits of society, but also to the very recognition of their dignity, which, as Fukuyama noted, has always been a deep-seated human need, but has never been achieved [14]. Such dehumanization makes underprivileged groups even more vulnerable that can lead to the internalization of imposed negative attitudes by this group or to protest movements and violent actions, which destabilize society.

Contemporary researchers aim to identify and explore overarching dimensions of social exclusion. According to Cuesta, López-Noval and Niño-Zarazúa, deprivations caused by social exclusion result from three dimensions:

- Identity – gender, age, race, ethnicity, religion, political affiliation, etc. Identities that differ from established norms and customs can lead to exclusion.
- Circumstances – forced displacement due to conflict, poverty, gender violence. There is a high risk of social exclusion, especially in the context of discriminatory norms, laws, and institutions.
- Disadvantaged socioeconomic position – the risk factors that contribute to exclusion in specific contexts are poverty, unemployment, and low levels of education [7].

Lakhani, Sacks and Heltberg [15] introduced three clusters of negative attitudes, which lead to social exclusion, that can be traced back to three sets of values:

- Intolerance for the poor and for different lifecycle stages.
- Intolerance toward stigmatized attributes and behaviors.
- Intolerance to specific identity groups.

As researchers stated, “variation in the presence of exclusionary values is, in part, related to country-specific factors. In contrast, the associations between the socio-economic characteristics of households and

individuals' exclusionary attitudes are weaker than the associations between country-specific factors (history, culture, and other factors that do not vary across households from the same country) and exclusionary attitudes. These results are novel in indicating that three distinct attitude types may drive exclusionary behavior and that country-specific factors are more important in explaining the prevalence of these attitudes than individual-level characteristics” [15].

In any case, being a representative of any of the above groups does not necessarily mean social exclusion, but it does warn of a high risk of finding oneself in such a situation that erodes society at its base. Social exclusion is the culmination of a whole series of specific exceptions to fundamental rights, such as the right to education, work, decent housing, rest and leisure, access to social protection, etc. Excluded people and groups are seen as having no rights, they are effectively deprived of the right to vote. The problems of victims of marginalization and social exclusion are usually not covered in official statistics and mainstream media – they are invisible to society. The final stage of the process of marginalization and social exclusion can be withdrawal from the game of life – suicide is one of the leading causes of death; and its number is growing, especially among young people, the lonely people, and the elderly [16].

Social exclusion is closely linked to income distribution at the international and national levels. According to Xiberras, exclusion accompanies the new stage of globalization, starting from territorial exclusion at both the global and local levels, which ultimately leads to exclusion at the level of social groups [17]: “within societies there are social groups that find themselves excluded and in which income differentiation implies a gradual disintegration of the ties by which they were bound to the rest of society. There are minority groups and indigenous peoples for whom the processes of globalization have led to severely accentuated phenomena of exclusion” [18]. This exclusion from social life leads to the absence of participation, segregation, neglect and being forgotten, and this evokes very specific feelings within the sectors that are not excluded. Freund put it this way: “It would appear that exclusion is now part of normality in societies, and does not arouse any special moral or political conscience but instead evokes pity in the guise of the virtue of charity” [17], concluding that the spread of many forms of exclusion and pseudo-exclusion in society is a sign of the times.

Social injustice fuels the fire of social exclusion, which reinforces unequal access to rights, resources, and opportunities based on factors such as race, gender, socioeconomic status, ethnicity, etc. Rooted in systemic inequality, it favors some groups while marginalizing

others and views basic human needs as privileges rather than rights. Social injustice is very difficult to combat because it is perpetuated by biased policies, cultural norms, and historical inequalities that continue to shape societies. An estimated 5 billion people have unmet justice needs globally, including people who cannot obtain justice for everyday problems, people who are excluded from the opportunity the law provides, and people who live in extreme conditions of injustice. This “justice gap” undermines human development, reinforces the poverty trap, and imposes high societal costs. Closing the justice gap is therefore vital to realizing the broader development agenda and its vision of a “just, equitable, tolerant, open and socially inclusive world in which the needs of the most vulnerable are met” [19].

Social underdevelopment also contributes to social exclusion. Certain groups of people are unable to integrate into the process of socioeconomic development due to lack of education, high levels of malnutrition, disease, and poor housing conditions. Therefore, they may be located territorially close to the main actors of socioeconomic change, but not be connected with them or be pushed by them to the margins of the social world. In societies with complex class systems, segregation, which is perceived there as a natural phenomenon and leads to discrimination in favor of some groups over others, underlies social exclusion.

A significant risk factor for social exclusion is homelessness, which affects both people without a roof over their heads and those living in unstable conditions. Homelessness also represents the absence or weakening of the connections that bind people together in a network of interconnected social structures. This ultimately leads to marginalization, including housing and financial difficulties, as well as non-participation in social and political life. Men usually become homeless due to financial difficulties, while women become homeless due to difficulties in family relationships [20].

A number of factors aggravate social exclusion, and among them (but not limited to them) are:

- Restrictive social groups – communities with strict rules, regulations, or barriers to membership. They limit the rights of non-members of their group: studies indicate that “that around 38% of countries have laws or policies that restrict the rights of certain social groups. Additionally, research shows that marginalized communities, such as ethnic minorities, face greater exclusion, with approximately 70% of countries having discriminatory practices against these groups” [21].

- Racial discrimination – any exclusion, restriction or preference based on race, color, ethnic origin which nullifies or impairs the recognition and exercise of human rights and fundamental freedoms. Racism is

generally a tool used by certain groups to strengthen their political and economic power [22].

- Extreme poverty – poverty levels vary and are determined not only by income levels, but also by psychological state, the quality of family relationships, social status, access to social measures and support, the ability to seek help from public organizations. According to the World Bank and the United Nations, “roughly 1.3 billion people live in a state of absolute poverty with nearly 25 million being added to their numbers each year” [23].

- Economic exclusion – social exclusion and discrimination are associated with uneven income distribution at global and local levels. It is associated with both territorial isolation and the presence of discriminated social groups, especially on the basis of gender, ethnicity or race.

- Discrimination against minorities – this discrimination is based on racial, religious, ideological, political, economic, etc. grounds and can manifest itself in education, employment, housing, public services.

- Cultural deprivation is the denial of the right to participate in the cultural life of society or the loss of cultural heritage. This leads to inequality of opportunities, a lack of social and individual development, and social and ethnic disintegration.

- Involuntary mass resettlement is often caused by economic and social inequality, violation of fundamental human rights, terrorism, foreign interference in internal affairs, acts of aggression, and development issues. Today, more and more people are forced to flee their homes as a result of armed conflicts, internal conflicts, and systemic human rights violations: “whereas refugees crossing national borders benefit from an established system of international protection and assistance, those who are displaced internally suffer from an absence of legal or institutional bases for their protection and assistance from the international community” [24]. Researchers stress that climate change will exacerbate existing problems in the regions and could lead to population displacement.

- Disability makes it difficult for people to function in the community which can lead to social exclusion. People with disabilities face an increased risk of social exclusion. For instance, “29.7% of the EU population aged 16 or more with a disability (activity limitation) was at risk of poverty or social exclusion compared with 18.8% of those with no disability” [25].

Social exclusion is rooted in the attitudes and behaviors of certain groups toward other groups that they perceive as different from their own groups. But this is not just a difference, it is an assessment on a value scale – we are better than them. Every group is a bearer of certain values that are cultivated, supported, and transmitted. Group members must share these values. Values

give meaning and purpose to all elements of culture. Values are the basis of cultural reality – they are the core of culture. If we imagine culture as an onion consisting of different layers (the “onion” model of culture) [26], then values are its center. Values give rise to our beliefs and assumptions, which are not always explicit, but they shape both the structure of our personality and group culture. They are taken for granted and support the group culture: “core values can be regarded as forming one of the most fundamental components of a group culture. They generally represent the heartland of the ideological system and act as identifying values which are symbolic of the group and its membership. Rejection of core values carries with it the threat of exclusion from the group... Core values are singled out for special attention because they provide the indispensable link between the group's cultural and social systems; in their absence both systems would suffer eventual disintegration. Indeed, it is through core values that social groups can be identified as distinctive ethnic, religious, scientific or other cultural communities” [27].

Values manifest themselves explicitly in goals, strategies, and philosophies that motivate us and shape our reality. Thus, values underlie people's views and behavior and, when representatives of different groups meet or clash, they can lead to exclusion. As Lakhani, Sacks and Heltberg emphasize, negative attitudes towards another group are unlikely to be limited to social context [15]. According to Schwartz, attitudes toward certain groups are likely to reflect deeper values that transcend specific situations and contexts [28]. Rokeach, the creator of one of the first universal and empirically substantiated theories of values, argued that value orientations, which he understood as a steadfast conviction in the fundamental superiority of certain goals or ways of existence over others, influenced all social phenomena in one way or another [29]. Therefore, the central role of values in defining oneself and others on the social map is crucial in the process of social exclusion.

Why do different value systems clash rather than strive to expand horizons and enrich each other? Is social exclusion inevitable in society? It is quite possible that this opposition to the Other and rejection of the Other is deeply rooted in human history. Ancient people mastered the world by splitting it into two parts: the developed and the undeveloped worlds, the friendly (or at least predictable) world, i.e., known world, Our world, and the hostile, unknown world – Their world (the world of Others). Such the binary opposition is, in essence, a conventional division of the world into two opposing parts. Literally, all objects and phenomena are components of this system. Universal binary opposi-

tions underlie all worldviews, and components of each opposition are not equal in value. Positive or negative values are attributed to all binary oppositions. Osgood came to the conclusion that human consciousness is characterized not only by bipolarity, but also by the fact that one of the poles is assessed as positive and the other as negative [30]. According to Levi-Strauss, binarity has a universal nature, and our thinking is still based on this scheme. Ambivalence in perceiving the world is also determined by physiological factors. The human brain is divided into two hemispheres, which are functionally asymmetrical. Thus, an eternal contradiction arises; and binarity gets the status of a fundamental principle of consciousness, which leads to ontological dissonance perceived as a fact of human existence [31]. Therefore, binarity and disparity in assessment permeate human life from ancient times to today's societies that speak of humanism, the value of each life, equal rights, and inclusion.

Today, in the world of a large number of interacting social groups, people still live in the “We – Other” paradigm due to primordial fear and demonstrate fundamental emotional reactions to danger, namely, stigma and prejudice that lead to social exclusion of the “Other” groups. By projecting controllable risk and, therefore, blame onto out-groups, people feel safer: “people's mental lives are launched within relationships with primary caregivers. Representational life emerges from these early relationships. The unconscious representational structures which infants form there construct the bases of subsequent patterns of thought. Early representations tend to be orientated towards protection of the self from anxiety. In order to accomplish this, ‘the other’ becomes the repository of all that the infant seeks to push out from its own space for the purpose of protection. These early building blocks of what is to be associated with the self, versus with others, leave their mark on the developing individual. Political and social ideas acquired in the course of the lifespan augment the individual's notion of what can comfortably be associated with self and in-group, and what is unacceptable and must be flung out beyond their walls. Individuals learn which qualities and actions are acceptable from the norms of the societies in which they live. At times of potential threat, when levels of anxiety are particularly high, the early mechanism of defense reappears, and the ‘other’ becomes the target of a rich array of projections which contain those aspects of experience from which individuals seek to distance their selves” [32]. Thus, responsibility for threats is shifted to the Other, who is then “demonized”. This mechanism can also protect the positive image of the in-group and self-identity.

Hence, binarity manifests itself in a social world, in

which “individuals are often classified, by themselves and by others, as belonging to a group or groups. This ‘grouping’ plays an important role in the normative process of social exclusion... Yet social groups are not natural phenomena; social groups are constructed by social processes and, as such, are often the product of dominant power relations in society. Defining differences and similarities between people is at the heart of ‘grouping’. This sorting of people into ‘similar’ and ‘different’ exists across all societies and is innate in people” [15].

A characteristic feature of social behavior is that representatives of different groups interact with each other not on the basis of their individual characteristics or personal preferences, but as members of we-groups (in-groups) entering into relationships with members of they-groups (out-groups); and representatives of they-groups are seen as “undifferentiated items in a unified social category, rather than in terms of their individual characteristics” [33]. For stability and cohesion of any group, recognition of their values is paramount. The assessment of one’s own group is made through social comparisons with other groups from the standpoint of value-oriented characteristics. Even “the mere perception of belonging to two distinct groups – that is, social categorization per se – is sufficient to trigger intergroup discrimination favoring the in-group. In other words, the mere awareness of the presence of an out-group is sufficient to provoke intergroup competitive or discriminatory responses on the part of the in-group” [33]. Intergroup discrimination tends to increase group self-esteem which leads to positive social identity [34].

In general, people perceive and interpret the world within their own models of reality, which were created by languages and other symbolic systems. At the level of communication, people explain the world around them, including the social world, in oppositions inherent in the culture in which they were socialized. Each of these patterns requires them to consider certain information the most important and absolutely true and respect only a certain class of signals, which pass through their filters [35]. Everything else can be not only ignored, but denied. If person’s concepts, attitudes, and ideas do not correspond to reality, he or she often adjusts the reality to match the stereotypes. This form of protection and internal resistance is very stable and almost insurmountable, people do not listen to themselves, but to “the voice of mother, father, to the voice of government, authorities, power, tradition, etc.” [36]. This “always right” game may be applicable to all spheres of human life. In general, people protect their concepts, attitudes, and beliefs from the checking by reality, considering this reality as unreliable or interpreting it in their own way [37].

Such a reaction indicates that in the field of human relations there is not only one objective reality, but also a variety of them, which we perceive through the lens of our concepts and attitudes. Classification helps people make sense of and organize the vast array of information, because without it, people would not be able to make judgments to understand the world. When classifying, people are often identified on the base of common characteristics, which may be real or not. However, in social contexts, group classification often plays an important role: group characteristics are attributed to individual members based on shared characteristics. Through this stereotyping, individuals are reduced to a few, often easily identifiable and exaggerated markers of difference, and placed into a group of people who share these characteristics [15]. The situation becomes critical and even dangerous when our concepts and stereotyping are not controlled by reality and are turned into a goal in itself, since people find it very difficult to abandon their individual mythologies, despite the fact that all this does not help them communicate effectively and solve problems constructively. This abandonment seems identical to self-denial [38]. And a vicious circle, which strengthens discriminatory attitudes and beliefs towards other groups that need to be “pushed out” from the center of social space to the margins, arises. These largely subconscious discriminatory attitudes are fueled by social institutions that assign value and allocate opportunities in the way that “systematically discriminates against particular groups of people, denying them the opportunities, resources, and recognition that would allow them to participate fully in social, economic and political life” [15].

Social exclusion has far-reaching negative consequences, detrimentally affecting all areas of lives of socially excluded people, thereby undermining the entire global social organism. Not to mention that social exclusion makes it difficult to achieve many social goals, such as a society of equal opportunities, social justice for all, the eradication of poverty, etc., it poses a threat to the basic need for security, which has an evolutionary basis [39], as well as the need for belonging – one of the strongest human motivations [40; 41]. DeWall stated that “humans have a fundamental need to belong. Just as we have needs for food and water, we also have needs for positive and lasting relationships... This need is deeply rooted in our evolutionary history and has all sorts of consequences for modern psychological processes” [42].

The feeling of being rejected causes pain. Eisenberger, Lieberman, and Williams found that social rejection activates many of the same brain regions involved in physical pain: “the experience and regulation of social

and physical pain share a common neuroanatomical basis. Activity in dorsal ACC (*anterior cingulate cortex*), previously linked to the experience of pain distress, was associated with increased distress after social exclusion. Furthermore, activity in RVPFC (*right ventral prefrontal cortex*), previously linked to the regulation of pain distress, was associated with diminished distress after social exclusion" [43].

Nowadays, increasing attention is being paid to the impact of social exclusion on physical and mental health and well-being of members of socially excluded or marginalized groups who tend to perceive prejudice against themselves in a wider range of contexts than members of privileged groups. Black Americans and ethnic minorities are more likely to report physical and mental health problems. They have very high rates of morbidity and mortality, high disability rates, shorter life expectancy, and high level of infant mortality [44, 45]. A 2015 meta-analysis demonstrated an association of racism and poor mental health including depression, anxiety, psychological stress and various other outcomes. Racism was also associated with poorer general and physical health [46].

Differences in health status are due to differences in material wealth, lifestyle, educational level, housing conditions, access to health services, as well as to discrimination that leads to social exclusion, since experienced or perceived racial prejudice or discrimination can be as important as objective life circumstances. Experience of discrimination is correlated with self-reported poor health, depression, lower life satisfaction, post-traumatic stress disorder. Perception of discrimination is correlated with increased anger, anxiety, hopelessness, feelings of worthlessness, resentment, and fear, and may be associated with increased alcohol consumption and smoking [47]. Persistent perception of prejudice and discrimination can create feeling of depression in disadvantaged groups and reduce the sense of control over their lives.

These negative consequences are also observed among other groups. Perception of in-group disadvantage is negatively correlated with psychological well-being among women, Jews, African Americans, the LGBT+ community, other non-mainstream groups, etc. Members of these groups are more likely to perceive discrimination as a reflection of systemic devaluation and rejection by a dominant culture, which is damaging to self-esteem and detrimental to psychological well-being [48].

For instance, LGBT+ people are more likely to develop mental health issues than the general population. Dealing with stigma, prejudice, and discrimination, they are at more risk of suicidal behavior and self-harm;

more likely to develop depression and anxiety disorder; experience conflict and harassment at work, verbal, physical, and sexual abuse; show symptoms of eating disorders, experience shame due to their body image; become victims of hate crime. Heavy drinking or drug use can make their mental health problems worse and potentially trigger new ones [49-51].

Another example is unequal treatment of individuals based on gender discrimination that leads to negative consequences. Gender inequality is harmful and has a negative impact on health including psychological distress, low self-esteem, depression, anxiety, concealed anger, somatic disorders, etc. [52]. Perceived prejudice against women is inversely related to self-reported psychological well-being [48]. Women who experienced gender discrimination at work reported higher levels of work-related stress.

When age discrimination comes into play, the situation becomes even worse. This is especially true for very young girls and older women. While the former are perceived as lacking experience and knowledge and expected to be obedient dolls, women over forty are more likely than older men to be perceived as having outdated skills or being poorly adapted to the changing world [53]. The social environment may in various ways induce age stereotypes and perpetuate internalized ageism, which can have detrimental effects on health and wellbeing. Age discrimination not only "removes" women from the public space rendering them invisible to the world, but also seriously undermines their health downplaying the value of wisdom, knowledge and life experience and eroding women's self-esteem. Though both genders are being devalued as they reach older age, women are under particular pressure [54]. Facing prejudice and discrimination, many women are at risk for mental health issues, such as anxiety, depression, psychological distress, obesity, substance abuse, cognitive decline. Ageism leads to social exclusion and loneliness, increases risk of experiencing violence and abuse. Ageism is associated with earlier death; poorer physical health; risky health behaviors; poor sexual and reproductive health and increase in rates of sexually transmitted infections; inappropriate medication use, including inappropriate prescribing, polypharmacy, and medication nonadherence [55; 56]. Different aspects of our identities intersect and affect each other. Women, in particular women of color, face barriers to economic security, health care, educational opportunities, employment prospects, housing, as well as a decline in mental health and wellbeing, especially when they are aging [57]. As 2021 "Mirror/Mirror" survey showed, African American women 50+ reported the highest levels of discrimination, with 70 percent saying

they experienced discrimination regularly, while 59 percent of Latinas and 60 percent of Asian American/Pacific Islanders age 50+ said they were regularly discriminated against [58].

Age discrimination affects not only women but also men. Most countries are currently experiencing a demographic transition with a proportional increase in the elderly population, who have higher rates of illness, disability, and partial or total financial dependence. Ageism makes older people more prone to social exclusion. Age-related difficulties, inequality, lack of participation in social and political life, disrupted social relationships, service exclusion increase the likelihood of depression, cognitive impairment, and decreased overall well-being among older adults [59, 60].

Multiple forms of disadvantage and discrimination exacerbate negative impacts on mental health and well-being and are associated with significantly higher rates of distress, suicidal ideation, and substance use [61]. A study on interrelationships between social exclusion, mental health and well-being in adolescents conducted in Australia showed that “young people who identified as gender diverse, Indigenous, living in economically disadvantaged areas and spoke a language other than English at home” were more vulnerable to social exclusion. They reported increased loneliness, negative feelings about the future, lack of control over their lives, poor overall perceived mental health, a mental health condition [62].


Social exclusion has a particularly strong impact on children and adolescents with detrimental consequences for their emotional and behavioral health; it causes academic difficulties, decreased prosocial behavior, and low self-esteem: “youth who report bias-based discrimination such as exclusion and rejection also display higher incidences of substance use/abuse, risky behaviors, mental health concerns (such as depression), and negative school-related outcomes in terms of achievement and truancy... adolescents who experience intergroup bullying that is intersectional... are more likely to engage in self-harm and suicidal ideation, and

to experience higher rates of depressive symptoms” [63]. Children and adolescents are a particularly vulnerable group, and adverse factors such as racial, religious, ethnic or other discrimination, as well as forced migration, are associated with increased anxiety, depression, personal insecurity, feelings of threat, and psychotic disorders [64]. Thus, the negative consequences of social exclusion in children and adolescents, who will shape our future, represent a serious challenge to the entire global community.

CONCLUSIONS

Tackling social exclusion, which has a detrimental effect on physical and mental health and undermines human dignity, requires concerted efforts at all levels of society. Today, it is especially important to develop a long-term transdisciplinary strategy, which addresses the multiple and overlapping disadvantages experienced by excluded groups: “social policies can enhance or moderate group consciousness and can exacerbate or reduce exclusion. Most states now have legislation to ban overt discrimination. In some countries, governments have introduced targeting through various forms of affirmative action” [65]. Social institutions, which guide people’s behavior through norms, are key to strategies for combating social exclusion. It is necessary to consider the actual mechanisms at work in terms of social exclusion, as well as interventions at the level of groups or individuals. Addressing discriminatory behavior alone or one type of inequality can lead to certain changes, however, these changes will not be decisive for underprivileged groups, as quite often negative stereotypes and prejudices, which impede social inclusion, are expressed in subtle ways. At the same time, addressing values that underlie exclusion and discrimination may be more effective and have more far-reaching consequences. The goal and outcome of these extensive responses to the acute problem of social exclusion is to create a global inclusive society where all voices are heard, and the voice of the “Other” is as significant as yours.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The Authors declare no conflict of interest

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