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**no man should be an island,
neither should any woman**

LOOKING AT MENTAL HEALTH IMPROVEMENT,
SOCIAL NETWORKS AND GENDER

SUMMARY REPORT

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Summary Report

The Scottish Government's National Programme for Improving Mental Health and Well-being is increasingly interested in a population-based approach to promoting mental health in Scotland. Additionally, tackling inequalities in mental health is one priority of its future agenda. This report attempts to further unpack the notion of a true population-based approach to mental health and inequalities. It explores the different experiences of mental health for women and men through an examination of their social networks as a specific protective factor. Taking gender into account when considering the role of social networks in mental health and well-being may seem obvious in practice, but, as found in consultation with practitioners, it is often both complex and overlooked. Drawing upon preliminary focus group research with the general public and conversations with practitioners across Scotland, this report intends to highlight gender issues that influence social networks, which are found to be protective for mental health. It also hopes to raise awareness and promote further discussion around mental health improvement and gender in practice.

Importance of social networks for mental health:

- Providing a buffer to stress and anxiety
- Contributing towards a sense of purpose
- Contributing towards stability in one's life
- Improved self-esteem, confidence and interpersonal skills
- Improved social support and trust.

Key findings:

- Stereotypical gender roles influence men and women's ability to form and maintain social networks
- Women's networks are typically composed of several close people to confide in, with a high number of family, and are often large in size
- Men's networks tend to be large in size with a higher number of co-workers and may be task-oriented with a focus on hierarchal standing
- In general, support from friends during hard times was preferred over support from family
- Some difficulties were experienced when sustaining or developing new friendships through transitional periods.

Considerations for practice:

- Motivating people to attend networks/groups or getting people 'through the door'
- Creating opportunities for people to make and sustain friendships
- Developing individual skills & characteristics may help promote social networks such as interpersonal skills, confidence, trust, interdependence
- Encouraging social networks and individual skills is a part of a process in maintaining and widening one's social networks
- Supporting men and women in building networks
- Supporting women in harmonising family, work and social life.