

Mental Health Inequalities across Irish University Students: A Cross-Sectional Exploratory Analysis

EPH34

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INTRODUCTION

Mental health among third level students is a growing concern, with increasing evidence highlighting significant disparities in mental health outcomes across student groups. (Dooley et al., 2019). Inequalities are often influenced by various factors including socio-economic status, geographical location, resource access and mental health literacy. Establishing and understanding influences and disparities is crucial for developing effective mental health combative strategies (Robertson, Mulachy & Baars, 2022).

OBJECTIVE

The aim of this study is to establish a baseline for understanding the driving factors of mental health and mental ill-health amongst third level students in Ireland. The objectives were:

- ❖ To examine the impact of socio-economic background on mental health outcomes.
- ❖ To identify any gender-based disparities in the diagnosis and reporting of mental health disorders.

METHODOLOGY

- ❑ An evidence-based, cross-sectional survey was developed and piloted.
- ❑ Students were recruited via an online social media campaign across a University with 9 campuses in the West and Northwest of Ireland.
- ❑ Data collected included demographic information, mental health literacy, clinical background and supports access.
- ❑ Descriptive and inferential analysis was undertaken utilising SPSS.
- ❑ Cross tabulation and association analysis was conducted on gender and mental health stigma awareness.

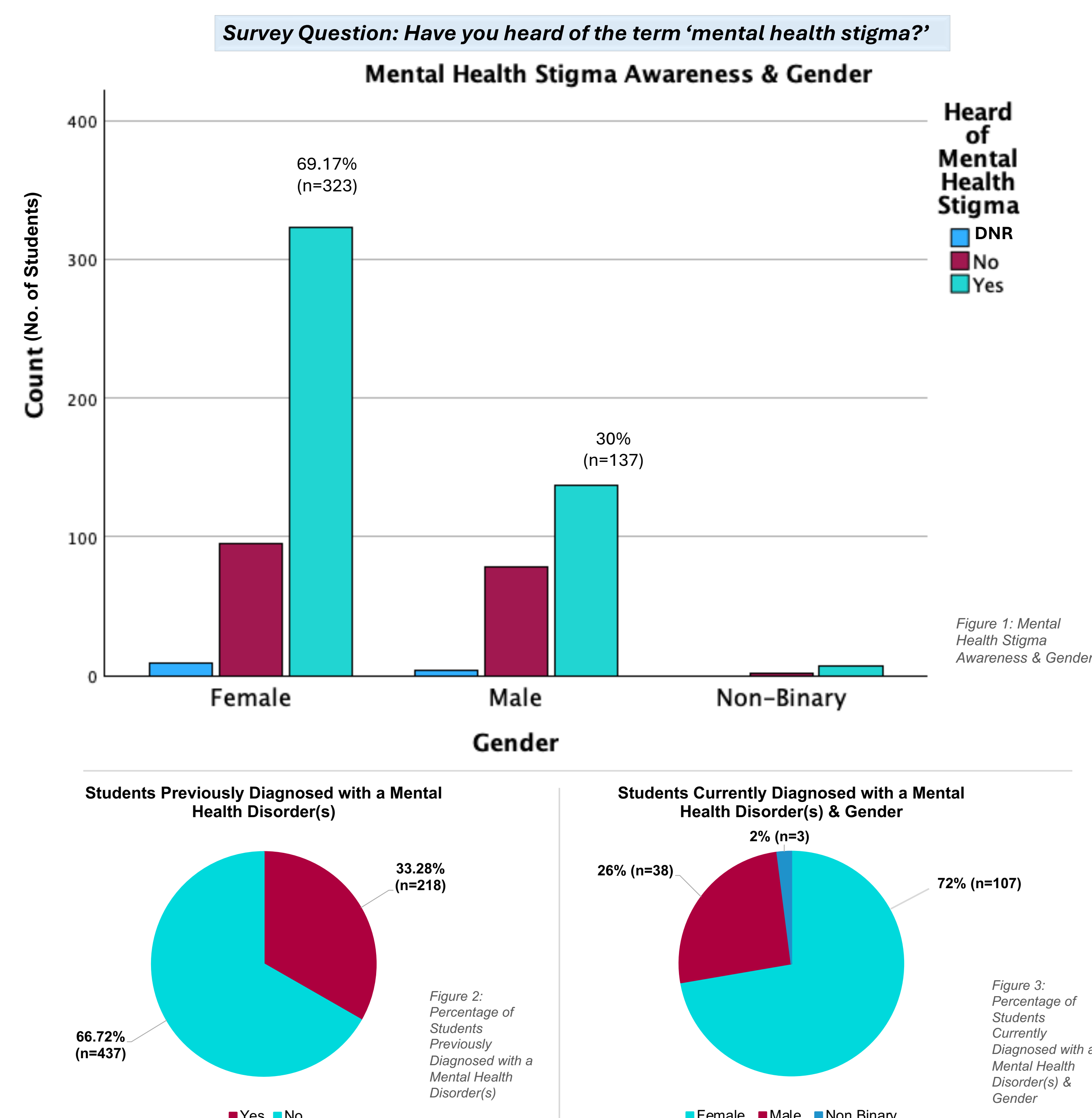
RESULTS

A total of **655 valid responses** from third and fourth level Irish students were recruited: 33.44% (n=219) Male students; 65.19% (n=427) Female; and 1.37% (n=9) other gender.

A third of students (33.28%; n=218) had a previous diagnosis of a mental health disorder(s) and 22.60% (n=148) reported currently having mental health issues. Notable, out of those who currently disclosed a mental health issue, just **55% (n=81) of those highlighted accessing supports**. However, gender was not a significant driver of mental health support utilisation among students (p = 0.117).

The drivers of lack of engagement in supports included student type i.e. undergraduate vs. postgraduate, full-time vs. part-time or online, and gender differences; **socio-economic status was a significant predictor of availing of supports** (p = 0.005).

Results reveal a **significant gender-based difference in mental health stigma awareness**. A considerable higher percentage of females (69.17%; n=323) demonstrated awareness of mental health stigma compared to males (30%; n=137). Non-parametric testing confirms a significant difference between gender, exceeding the 99% CI; $\chi^2(1, n=655) = 13.521, p = 0.009$.



CONCLUSIONS

- Gender plays a key role in shaping mental health stigma awareness, with females significantly more likely to recognise stigma compared to males. Availing of free supports as a student also appears to be a function of gender and socioeconomic status.
- This underscores the importance of considering the need for further investigation in how comprehensive policy reforms at university and at national policy level can alleviate observed inequalities in mental health challenges and perceptions of mental health stigma in broader interventions.
- By acknowledging and targeting these differences, mental health initiatives can more effectively engage population sub-groups creating more inclusive, stigma-free environments. Diverse student populations at third level institutions require person-centred approaches to create supportive, flexible and sustainable environments that promotes mental health and well-being.

REFERENCES

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