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# BIPOLAR DISORDER AS A CONTEMPORARY ISSUE IN SOCIAL WORK: GLOBAL PERSPECTIVES AND THE NIGERIAN CONTEXT

**Omofonmwan Faith Osahenrumen**

Department of Social Work, Faculty of Social Sciences, Babcock University, Ilishan Remo, Ogun State. Nigeria
**Email:** theomofonmwanfaith@gmail.com

## Abstract

*Bipolar disorder is increasingly recognized as a complex mental health condition with significant clinical, social, and economic consequences across global contexts. This paper examines bipolar disorder as a contemporary issue in social work, with particular attention to its manifestations in the Nigerian context. Adopting a biopsychosocial perspective, the study moves beyond purely biomedical explanations to explore how biological vulnerability interacts with psychological processes and social determinants such as stigma, poverty, cultural interpretations, and limited access to care. Drawing on content review of scholarly literature and policy reports, the paper analyses patterns of diagnosis, treatment gaps, and lived experiences associated with the disorder. The findings indicate that while advances in high-income countries have improved early detection and management, substantial disparities persist in sub-Saharan Africa, where structural constraints and sociocultural factors contribute to delayed diagnosis and poor outcomes. Importantly, the study highlights the limited integration of social work within mental health systems in Nigeria, despite the profession's capacity to address the social and environmental dimensions of bipolar disorder. It concludes that effective intervention requires integrated, culturally responsive approaches and a strengthened role for social workers in mental health practice, policy development, and advocacy.*

**KEYWORDS:** Bipolar disorder, Biopsychosocial model, Mental health, Treatment gap, Stigma

## 1. Introduction

Across contemporary mental health discourse, increasing attention has been directed toward conditions characterized by severe disruptions in mood, cognition, and functioning, particularly those with recurrent and disabling trajectories. Among these,

bipolar disorder has emerged as a significant contributor to the global burden of disease, not only because of its clinical severity but also due to its profound social and economic implications. Bipolar disorder is estimated to affect approximately 40–50 million people globally and is consistently ranked among the leading causes of disability worldwide (World Health Organization, 2023). Individuals living with the condition frequently experience alternating episodes of elevated and depressed mood states that extend beyond ordinary emotional variation. These episodes often result in impaired functioning across interpersonal, occupational, and psychosocial domains (World Health Organization, 2023; McIntyre et al., 2020). These disruptions, which commonly begin in late adolescence or early adulthood, can shape life trajectories in ways that extend far beyond the clinical sphere.

In high-income countries, advances in psychiatric research, early diagnostic frameworks, and integrated mental health services have contributed to improved recognition and management of bipolar disorder. There is growing emphasis on early intervention, multidisciplinary care, and long-term management strategies that incorporate both pharmacological and psychosocial approaches (Malhi et al., 2021). Despite these advancements, bipolar disorder continues to be linked with significant functional impairment, elevated relapse rates, and a heightened risk of suicide, with individuals diagnosed with the disorder estimated to have a lifetime suicide risk of approximately 15–20% (Malhi et al., 2021). This highlights its enduring complexity, even within well-resourced systems (Murray et al., 2020). So, even though there has been progress in understanding and treating patients, there are still problems with long-term care and reintegrating into society.

The realities in many developing nations, on the other hand, show a very different picture, because mental health systems in low- and middle-income countries, including those in sub-Saharan Africa, often have problems like poor infrastructure, lack of funding, and not enough trained professionals. These structural limitations result in a substantial treatment gap, leaving a considerable number of individuals with mental health conditions undiagnosed or untreated (World Health Organization, 2023; Abdulmalik et al., 2019). The World Health Organization (2023) says that more than 75–90% of people with mental health problems in sub-Saharan Africa do not get the right treatment. This is one of the biggest treatment gaps in the world. In these situations, bipolar disorder is even worse because people don't know much about mental health and can't get evidence-based care easily. This leads to longer periods of untreated illness and worse outcomes.

Beyond structural constraints, sociocultural interpretations of mental illness play a critical role in shaping experiences and responses to bipolar disorder in sub-Saharan Africa. In many communities, symptoms associated with mood disorders are frequently understood through spiritual or supernatural frameworks, which influence help-seeking pathways and often prioritize traditional or religious interventions over biomedical care (Ae-Ngibise et al., 2021). While such belief systems are deeply embedded within cultural contexts, they may contribute to delayed diagnosis, fragmented care, and increased stigma, thereby complicating effective management of the disorder.

Nigeria reflects these broader regional challenges while also presenting distinct contextual complexities. Mental health services in the country remain significantly underdeveloped, with a disproportionate concentration of resources in urban centres and limited integration of mental health into primary healthcare systems (Gureje et al., 2019). With a population exceeding 200 million, Nigeria operates with fewer than 300 psychiatrists and maintains an extremely low psychiatric bed ratio, reflecting a severe mismatch between population need and service availability (Abdulmalik et al., 2019; World Health Organization, 2023). In addition, mental health funding remains disproportionately low, further constraining access to care and contributing to a substantial treatment gap. Access to care varies considerably across regions, with rural areas experiencing greater service deficits compared to urban populations. Furthermore, sociocultural attitudes toward mental illness continue to be shaped by stigma, misconceptions, and spiritual interpretations, which may discourage individuals from seeking timely professional intervention.

Variations also exist across different parts of Nigeria that are influenced by cultural, socioeconomic, and religious contexts. In certain southern areas, rising urbanization and exposure to biomedical health models have led to gradual changes in mental health awareness and service usage. In some parts of northern Nigeria, traditional and religious frameworks are still the most important ways to understand and treat mental health problems. This can change how people get care and make them less likely to use formal health systems. These regional disparities highlight the necessity of contextualizing bipolar disorder within its distinct sociocultural and geographical frameworks (Ae-Ngibise et al., 2021; Abdulmalik et al., 2019).

Despite increasing recognition of mental health as a public health priority in Nigeria, bipolar disorder remains insufficiently examined within social work scholarship and practice. Existing studies have largely concentrated on clinical diagnosis and treatment, with comparatively limited engagement with the social dimensions of the disorder, including stigma, family dynamics, and community reintegration (Gureje et al., 2019; Abdulmalik et al., 2019). This gap is particularly significant for social work, given its focus on the interaction between individuals and their social environments, as well as its role in addressing both psychosocial needs and structural inequalities. Against this backdrop, this paper examines bipolar disorder as a contemporary issue in social work practice, drawing on global perspectives while situating the analysis in the Nigerian context. It seeks to bridge the divide between clinical understanding and social work practice by emphasizing the importance of integrated, person-in-environment approaches to mental health intervention.

## Literature Review

The concept of bipolar disorder has been extensively defined within psychiatric literature; however, its interpretation remains contested when examined beyond strictly clinical parameters. Within dominant diagnostic frameworks, bipolar disorder is

classified as a mood disorder characterized by recurrent episodes of mania or hypomania and depression, accompanied by significant disturbances in mood, energy, and activity levels (American Psychiatric Association, 2022). While such definitions provide an essential foundation for diagnosis, existing literature highlights that their emphasis on symptom classification reflects a predominantly biomedical orientation, that does not fully capture the complexity of the condition. This paper aligns with contemporary scholarship that challenges the sufficiency of purely diagnostic conceptualizations. Existing literature, including Malhi et al. (2021), does not conceptualise bipolar disorder as a series of separate episodes. Instead, they see it as a mood disorder that is caused by interactions between biological and social factors. Similarly, McIntyre et al. (2020) emphasise within the literature that different people and situations show the disorder in different ways. These viewpoints underscore the inadequacies of inflexible diagnostic classifications and advocate for a more holistic and contextually aware understanding of bipolar disorder.

Existing literature also emphasises that bipolar disorder has a strong biological and genetic basis and can affect people from all walks of life. The existence of the disorder among high-functioning individuals, encompassing professionals and public figures, substantiates the assertion that it cannot be solely attributed to social disadvantage. This paper argues that although biological factors may contribute to the onset of bipolar disorder, social determinants are pivotal in influencing its expression, trajectory, and outcomes. In this regard, factors such as access to care, stigma, social support, and socioeconomic conditions influence not the existence of the disorder, but how it is experienced and managed (World Health Organization, 2023; United Nations, 2022; Malhi et al., 2021).

A further conceptual challenge lies in distinguishing bipolar disorder from related mood disorders, particularly major depressive disorder. Although depressive episodes are common to both conditions, bipolar disorder is defined by the presence of manic or hypomanic states. These elevated mood states, however, are frequently under-recognized, especially in contexts where mental health awareness and diagnostic capacity are limited. As Abdulmalik et al. (2019) observe, such ambiguities contribute to patterns of misdiagnosis and inappropriate treatment, thereby underscoring the importance of conceptual clarity for both clinical accuracy and effective intervention. Beyond diagnostic distinctions, there is increasing recognition that bipolar disorder must be understood as a socially situated condition. As Lund et al. (2018) argue, structural factors such as poverty, inequality, and limited access to healthcare significantly influence the progression and outcomes of mental disorders, particularly in low- and middle-income settings. From this standpoint, bipolar disorder cannot be adequately conceptualized solely as an individual pathology; rather, it must be understood within the broader social and environmental contexts that shape mental health experiences.

Within social work discourse, this expanded understanding is particularly significant. The person-in-environment perspective provides a framework for examining how individual experiences of bipolar disorder are shaped by interactions between personal

vulnerabilities and environmental conditions, including family systems, community structures, and institutional arrangements. In this regard, bipolar disorder is understood not simply as an individual pathology but as a condition whose expression and outcomes are shaped by social context, including family dynamics, cultural interpretations of mental illness, and socioeconomic conditions (Tew, 2020; International Federation of Social Workers, 2022).. This approach challenges reductionist interpretations that locate the problem exclusively within the individual and instead emphasizes the interconnectedness of personal and social factors.

From a social work standpoint, this perspective is reinforced by the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW, 2022), which defines social work as a profession committed to social change, empowerment, and the promotion of wellbeing through engagement with both individuals and their environments. Tew (2020) further argues that mental health should be understood within the context of social relationships and structural conditions, rather than being reduced solely to individual pathology. These social work-specific perspectives are essential complements to psychiatric definitions, particularly in contexts such as Nigeria where structural inequalities and cultural belief systems significantly shape the experience of mental illness. Drawing on these perspectives, this paper adopts an integrated conceptual position that views bipolar disorder as both a clinical condition and a socially embedded experience. While acknowledging the importance of diagnostic frameworks, it argues that such frameworks are insufficient in isolation. A more comprehensive understanding requires the integration of biological, psychological, and social dimensions, particularly within low- and middle-income contexts where cultural beliefs, structural inequalities, and limited access to mental health services intersect.

**Theoretical Framework**

This research is grounded in the biopsychosocial model, initially proposed by George L. Engel (1977) as a countermeasure to the reductionism inherent in the biomedical paradigm. The biomedical model views mental illness mainly as a biological dysfunction, while the biopsychosocial framework offers a more complex understanding by emphasizing the interaction among biological, psychological, and social factors. This kind of integrated approach works best for bipolar disorder, which is a complex condition that cannot be fully explained by a single factor. In this context, bipolar disorder is perceived not merely as a neurobiological condition but as the outcome of interrelated systems functioning at various levels. Biological influences, encompassing genetic predisposition and neurochemical mechanisms, are well-documented in the literature (Malhi et al., 2021); however, their effects are moderated by psychological and environmental factors. Psychological processes, including emotional regulation, cognitive appraisal, and coping capacity, influence both the expression and progression of the disorder. McIntyre et al. (2020) note that variations in these processes lead to disparities in symptom manifestation and recovery results.

Equally central to the biopsychosocial model is its emphasis on the structuring role of

social context. Conditions such as stigma, socioeconomic disadvantage, and constrained access to mental health services significantly influence both the course of bipolar disorder and the likelihood of sustained recovery. Lund et al. (2018) contend that these social determinants are integral to understanding mental health outcomes, particularly within low- and middle-income settings where systemic inequities are pronounced. From this perspective, bipolar disorder is more accurately understood as a condition influenced by and integrated within broader environmental contexts.

The explanatory power of the biopsychosocial model is especially clear in Nigeria. Biological vulnerability may be uniform across populations; however, structural deficiencies, including insufficient mental health infrastructure, shortages of trained professionals, and restricted access to diagnostic and treatment services, impede timely identification and intervention. From a psychological standpoint, the lack of extensive psychoeducation and therapeutic assistance limits individuals' capacity to effectively manage the condition. At the social level, stigma, poverty, and culturally ingrained explanatory models significantly influence the experience and progression of bipolar disorder. These interacting dimensions emphasize the need for context-sensitive approaches and underscore the vital role of social work in addressing individual needs and structural barriers (Abdulmalik et al., 2019; World Health Organization, 2022; Kola et al., 2022; United Nations, 2022).

## .Methodology

This study adopts a content analysis of secondary data, employing systematic content and thematic analysis to examine existing literature on bipolar disorder across global, sub-Saharan African, and Nigerian contexts, with particular emphasis on its relevance to social work practice. Data were derived from peer-reviewed journal articles, epidemiological reports, policy documents, and publications from authoritative bodies such as the World Health Organization, identified through structured searches of academic databases and pertinent scholarly repositories. Sources were chosen based on how relevant, trustworthy, and recent they were, with a focus on works published between 2019 and 2026 to make sure they fit with what is being talked about right now. The study employs systematic review and synthesis to delineate principal themes concerning the conceptualization, determinants, and social ramifications of bipolar disorder. This methodological approach is suitable as it facilitates a thorough and contextually informed analysis while incorporating multidisciplinary perspectives vital for comprehending the intricacies of mental health in social work.

## Critical Analysis of Bipolar Disorder as a Contemporary Issue in Nigeria

Bipolar disorder, in the context of contemporary social work discourse, reveals a fundamental conflict between biomedical hegemony and the necessity for more socially informed interpretations of mental illness. Although psychiatric literature has achieved considerable progress in elucidating genetic and neurochemical correlates of the disorder

(Malhi et al., 2021), this focus frequently prioritizes clinical stabilization over enduring social functioning. Consequently, treatment modalities may effectively manage symptoms while neglecting the structural and relational factors that influence relapse, recovery, and overall quality of life. This imbalance prompts significant inquiries regarding the sufficiency of existing models, especially from a social work standpoint that emphasizes person-in-environment frameworks. This limitation becomes more evident when analyzed within a global framework characterized by substantial disparities in mental health systems. High-income countries have made care pathways that are more integrated, but these models often require a lot of resources and are not easy to use in low- and middle-income countries. As a result, global mental health frameworks may reinforce a one-size-fits-all approach that does not adequately consider contextual variations. The ongoing existence of significant treatment disparities in sub-Saharan Africa, despite increasing global awareness, indicates that the problem is not solely one of knowledge but rather of systemic inequity and unequal resource allocation (World Health Organization, 2023).

In Nigeria, these global differences combine with local systemic and sociocultural realities in ways that make living with bipolar disorder even harder. The limited availability of mental health professionals and infrastructure not only restricts access to care but also influences the recognition, interpretation, and management of the disorder. Cultural and religious factors often shape how people get care. frameworks, which may coexist with or compete against biomedical explanations. Rather than viewing these frameworks as barriers alone, a more critical perspective recognizes them as integral components of the social environment that must be engaged strategically within intervention processes. Stigma also works as a structural force that goes beyond individual attitudes and affects how institutions respond, what policies are prioritized, and how resources are distributed. The enduring stigma in Nigerian society signifies more profound challenges associated with mental health literacy and societal perceptions of illness. Its impact is especially pronounced in bipolar disorder, where variable symptoms may be misconstrued or misinterpreted, resulting in delayed intervention and social ostracism. Addressing stigma therefore requires not only awareness campaigns but also broader efforts to transform social narratives around mental health.

A critical gap also emerges in the limited integration of social work within mental health systems. Despite the profession's capacity to address the psychosocial and environmental dimensions of mental illness, its role remains underutilized in Nigeria. This underrepresentation reflects broader institutional priorities that favor clinical expertise over multidisciplinary approaches. However, given the complex interaction between individual vulnerability and social context in bipolar disorder, excluding social work from core mental health strategies represents a missed opportunity for more holistic and sustainable interventions.

Finally, policy responses to mental health in Nigeria illustrate the challenges of translating legislative progress into practical outcomes. While recent reforms signal increased recognition of mental health issues, implementation remains inconsistent and

constrained by funding limitations and systemic inefficiencies (Kola et al., 2022). This disconnect between policy intent and practice underscores the need for stronger institutional commitment and accountability mechanisms. From a social work perspective, effective intervention must therefore extend beyond individual care to include advocacy for structural reform and improved service delivery systems. This reinforces the need to reconceptualise bipolar disorder not only as a clinical condition but as a socially mediated experience requiring interdisciplinary intervention. These issues are further reflected in the key findings of this study, which are presented below.

**Findings**

An integrative review of the literature examined in this study reveals several key findings that highlight both the structural challenges and practice opportunities associated with bipolar disorder within the Nigerian context. These findings, derived from the critical analysis of secondary data, reflect consistent patterns observed across global and local scholarship. A major finding is the persistence of a substantial treatment gap in the management of bipolar disorder, particularly within low- and middle-income settings. While this gap is often attributed to limited resources, the evidence suggests a more complex interaction of factors, including shortages of mental health professionals, inadequate infrastructure, limited availability of psychotropic medications, and sociocultural barriers such as stigma and preference for traditional healing practices (World Health Organization, 2023; World Bank, 2022; Gureje et al., 2019). In Nigeria, a significant proportion of individuals living with severe mental disorders do not receive appropriate care, resulting in prolonged untreated illness and increased psychosocial burden.

A second important finding is the role of social inequality in shaping mental health outcomes. Individuals from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds, including those living in poverty, rural communities, and socially marginalized groups, tend to experience delayed diagnosis, reduced access to treatment, and poorer recovery outcomes. This pattern indicates that bipolar disorder outcomes are not determined solely by biological factors but are significantly influenced by structural conditions such as income level, education, and access to healthcare (Lund et al., 2018; United Nations, 2022). These findings reinforce the relevance of social work interventions that address social determinants alongside clinical care.

The analysis also shows that community-based and multidisciplinary approaches are not used enough in Nigeria's mental health system. Evidence from similar low-resource environments indicates that interventions like community-based care, psychoeducation, and task-shifting strategies can enhance treatment accessibility and patient outcomes (Kola et al., 2022). But these kinds of services are still not widely used in Nigeria, where mental health services still rely heavily on centralized, hospital-based models. This gap shows that social workers could do more to help people in their communities and provide services.n centralized, hospital-based models. This gap highlights an opportunity for social workers to play a more active role in community-level intervention and service

delivery. Another significant finding relates to the influence of policy and institutional frameworks. Although there have been recent efforts to reform mental health legislation in Nigeria, implementation remains limited due to inadequate funding, weak institutional capacity, and lack of integration into primary healthcare systems (Abdulmalik et al., 2019; Federal Ministry of Health Nigeria, 2023). This disconnect between policy development and practical implementation continues to hinder the effectiveness of mental health services.

Finally, the findings underscore the central role of culture in shaping the experience and management of bipolar disorder. Cultural beliefs about mental illness influence how symptoms are interpreted, how individuals seek help, and how communities respond to affected individuals. Rather than viewing these beliefs solely as barriers, the literature suggests that culturally responsive approaches that engage with local belief systems can improve treatment acceptance and outcomes (Ae-Ngibise et al., 2021; Africa Centres for Disease Control and Prevention, 2022). This highlights the importance of culturally informed social work practice in addressing bipolar disorder within the Nigerian context. In general, the results show that bipolar disorder cannot be effectively treated with only clinical methods. Instead, we need strategies that are integrated and sensitive to the context, and that include social, cultural, and structural factors along with medical treatment. This highlights the importance of social work in tackling bipolar disorder as a current issue, especially in contexts like Nigeria where environmental factors profoundly influence mental health outcomes.

**Conclusion**

This article has endeavored to position bipolar disorder as a significant contemporary issue in social work, analyzing its global epidemiology, its expressions in sub-Saharan Africa, and its intricate social, cultural, and structural aspects within the Nigerian framework. The study utilized the biopsychosocial model to illustrate that bipolar disorder cannot be comprehensively understood or effectively treated through clinical methods alone; instead, it necessitates an integrative practice framework that encompasses biological factors, psychological experiences, and the systemic conditions that dictate the provision of care, the circumstances surrounding it, and the resultant outcomes. The analysis indicates that stigma, insufficient mental health literacy, inadequate infrastructure, policy and structural constraints, and cultural tensions between biomedical and indigenous healing paradigms collectively influence the experience and management of bipolar disorder in Nigeria. Moreover, overarching patterns of social inequality, especially those associated with socioeconomic factors, further limit access to care and affect recovery outcomes. These challenges transcend the confines of clinical intervention, underscoring the necessity of comprehending bipolar disorder not merely as a medical condition but also as a socially ingrained phenomenon.

It is also important to note that the current level of social work involvement with bipolar disorder in Nigeria does not show the full potential of the profession. The inadequate incorporation of social workers into mental health systems, policy frameworks, and

research domains signifies a significant deficiency that necessitates rectification to attain more comprehensive and contextually attuned methodologies. To make social work stronger, Nigeria needs to put money into education, practice frameworks, and policies that are in line with the country's needs. To effectively address bipolar disorder as a contemporary issue, there must be a transition towards integrated, multidisciplinary approaches that synchronize clinical care with social intervention. This method not only helps individuals, but it also helps the larger goal of creating fair and culturally responsive mental health systems.

**Recommendations**

The following recommendations are made as the way forward:

1. This requires embedding social workers across primary, secondary, and tertiary care levels as core members of multidisciplinary teams, supported by clear role definitions, workforce expansion, and professional recognition within national mental health policy frameworks.

2. The efficacy of Nigeria's mental health response is contingent not on the availability of policies but on the capacity for implementation. Reform that focuses on implementation is needed, and it should include enough funding, ways to hold people accountable, and ways to include mental health care in primary health care systems.

3. Social workers ought to be strategically integrated into policy formulation, oversight, and advocacy initiatives to guarantee that mental health interventions are not only clinically valid but also socially attuned, equitable, and accessible to various populations

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