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International Affairs Committee Member Spotlight: Dr. Marilyn Ahun

AUTHOR

Dr. Marilyn Ahun

Assistant Professor

McGill University

Q: Describe your current position and research agenda.

A: I am currently an Assistant Professor in the Department of Medicine, where I conduct research on child and youth mental health, teach courses in clinical research and global health, and contribute to departmental activities through committee work and other service activities. My research program examines how early environment impacts child and youth mental health in diverse sociocultural contexts, including how we can optimize interventions and services to promote mental health across the lifespan.

Q: What drew you to work on your current topic?

A: My research journey began during my undergraduate studies, when I had the opportunity to contribute to a study on maternal and child health in Ghana - my home country. One component of the study was to examine how maternal depression impacted children's development. This work opened my eyes to the importance of parental mental health and the need for community and institutional resources to support the well-being of parents in the first few years of their child's life. I have since been passionate about understanding the role of the

early childhood environment on later developmental and mental health outcomes, as well as identifying the best ways to intervene and support families, ensuring that all children have a good start in life.

Q: Was there a particularly influential study in the field or in a related field that drew you to your current work?

A: Goodman and Gotlib's 1999 Developmental Model for Understanding Mechanisms of Transmission has been a guiding light for my research over the past decade. It provides a detailed summary of the different mechanisms through which maternal depression can impact child mental health, highlighting key gaps in the field and providing clear guidelines for future research, which scholars continue to build on today.

Q: Do you have a mentor or mentors who have been instrumental to your career and, if so, whom and how?

A: I had the pleasure of connecting with Sherryl Goodman when organizing a symposium for the SRCD 2019 Biennial Meeting. Her kindness and generosity have been incredibly helpful in my career. Having someone who is willing to freely share their experiences and to provide a listening ear as you navigate your career makes such a difference. I have many other mentors who continue to support and guide me in my work.

Q: What words of wisdom might you pass on to someone on their very first day after deciding to pursue a Ph.D. in developmental science or a related field?

A: Focus on building meaningful relationships with the students, professors, and staff around you. Science is not an individual endeavor, it is built out of conversations and connections with the people around us.

Q: Can you share a recent publication?

A: I had the opportunity to engage with policymakers, clinicians, and academics in Ghana to disseminate my research and think through how we can address child mental health in the country. Inspired by a policy session at the SRCD 2025 meeting, I collaborated with the other attendees to publish a commentary summarizing our discussions and calling Ghanaian stakeholders to action. This commentary was published in the recently launched Lancet Regional Health - Africa, which aims to empower African voices to address African issues.
https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanafr/article/PIIS3050-5011(25)00010-0/fulltext

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Q: How has collaboration with international colleagues enhanced your work?

A: My current research program only exists because of the contributions of my Ghana-based colleagues. Their diverse expertise and direct experience of living and working in Ghana enriches the work that we do by grounding it in the local context.

Q: Where can people connect with you?

A: https://www.linkedin.com/in/marilynahun/