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Autism in Lebanon looking back to inform the future

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Abstract

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) in Lebanon has gained increasing recognition in recent years, although significant challenges remain in diagnosis, treatment, and societal awareness. This study examines the development and current state of ASD in Lebanon, focusing on cultural perceptions, healthcare systems, educational support, and societal attitudes. A mixed-methods approach was used, involving a literature review, surveys of healthcare professionals and parents, and interviews with experts in autism care.

The study reveals a lack of early diagnostic services, limited access to specialized educational programs, and cultural stigma, which prevent families from seeking proper support. Additionally, urban-rural disparities exist, with urban regions generally having better access to autism-related services. The need for a coordinated approach to ASD interventions that incorporates cultural sensitivity is emphasized, along with the integration of emerging technologies and evidence-based practices to address the growing demand for autism services in Lebanon.

Keywords: Autism, Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), Lebanon, diagnosis and treatment, cultural perceptions, healthcare systems

Introduction

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a neurodevelopmental condition characterized by impairments in social communication, restrictive behaviors, and difficulty adapting to changes in routines or environments. ASD encompasses a broad range of presentations, from individuals with intellectual disabilities to those with high-functioning capabilities who may excel in certain areas, such as mathematics, music, or art. The prevalence of ASD has been steadily increasing worldwide, yet significant challenges remain in its diagnosis, treatment, and societal acceptance.

ASD is typically diagnosed in early childhood, with signs often emerging before the age of 3. The symptoms of ASD can vary significantly between individuals, but common indicators include challenges with verbal and non-verbal communication, difficulties in understanding social norms, and repetitive behaviors. These traits can be accompanied by intellectual disabilities or can exist in individuals with average or above-average intelligence. Early intervention is often emphasized, as research has shown that timely support can lead to significant improvements in communication, behavior, and adaptive functioning.

The global increase in ASD diagnoses over recent decades has been attributed to a combination of heightened awareness, improved diagnostic criteria, and better access to healthcare services. However, the understanding and treatment of ASD are influenced by cultural, societal, and healthcare factors, which can vary greatly from one country to another. In Lebanon, the situation is complex due to a combination of cultural, social, and healthcare factors that impact the diagnosis and treatment of ASD. The importance of early diagnosis and intervention cannot be overstated, as these play a crucial role in improving the quality of life for individuals with ASD. However, in Lebanon, autism remains underdiagnosed, and many children are not identified until later in life, which can delay the implementation of crucial therapies and interventions.

The healthcare system in Lebanon is marked by a mix of public and private providers, with the private sector offering a wider range of specialized services, including diagnostic evaluations and therapeutic interventions. However, the availability and affordability of these services remain limited, particularly in rural or underserved areas. Additionally, there is a notable gap in the training and awareness of healthcare professionals in diagnosing and managing ASD, which further exacerbates the challenges faced by families seeking support. The recognition of autism in Lebanon has evolved over the past few decades. Historically, autism was not widely understood in the country, and children with ASD were often

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misdiagnosed with other conditions such as intellectual disabilities or behavioral disorders. The lack of awareness and understanding of autism led to delays in diagnosis, leaving many children without the support and resources they needed for early development.

In recent years, there has been a growing recognition of ASD, spurred by international advocacy and research, as well as the efforts of local NGOs and autism support groups. Organizations such as the Lebanese Autism Society have played a key role in raising awareness about autism and advocating for better services for individuals with ASD. Despite these advancements, significant challenges remain in ensuring that all individuals with autism receive timely diagnosis and appropriate interventions.

Objectives of the Study

The objective of this study is to explore the historical and current trends in the recognition, diagnosis, and treatment of autism in Lebanon. The research will delve into the key challenges faced by families and healthcare providers in Lebanon and will assess the effectiveness of current services and interventions for individuals with ASD. By examining the evolution of autism recognition in Lebanon and the impact of cultural, societal, and healthcare factors, this study aims to provide a comprehensive overview of the autism landscape in the country.

The understanding of Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) has evolved considerably over the last few decades. Initially recognized as a rare condition, autism was first described in 1943 by Leo Kanner, who outlined the core features of the disorder: social and communicative impairments, as well as a tendency toward restricted behaviors and routines. Since then, the recognition of autism has expanded significantly, with diagnostic criteria evolving and widening to encompass the broader spectrum of autism presentations, from individuals with intellectual disabilities to those with average or above-average cognitive functioning.

One of the key developments in autism research has been the refinement of diagnostic criteria. The publication of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM) by the American Psychiatric Association has played a pivotal role in standardizing autism diagnosis. The DSM-IV (1994) and DSM-V (2013) diagnostic criteria have refined how autism is understood, emphasizing the spectrum of symptoms rather than a strict categorization of the disorder. This has led to better identification and recognition of autism in a wider range of individuals.

Early intervention has been consistently shown to be one of the most effective ways to improve long-term outcomes for children with ASD. Research has indicated that the earlier a child receives a diagnosis and begins intervention, the better the chances of improving communication, social, and adaptive skills. Programs like Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA) and early intensive behavioral intervention (EIBI) have demonstrated efficacy in improving key developmental outcomes, including language acquisition, social skills, and independent living abilities. A landmark study by Lovaas (1987) ^[8] highlighted that early intervention could lead to significant improvements in IQ and adaptive behavior, establishing early intervention as a critical element in autism treatment. In the Middle East, the recognition and understanding of Autism Spectrum Disorder has lagged behind that of Western countries. However, recent years have seen significant progress in autism awareness and

research in the region. Autism is increasingly recognized as a major public health issue in many Middle Eastern countries, with growing efforts to improve diagnosis, treatment, and support services.

In Lebanon, autism awareness has been slow to develop, and the country faces unique challenges in diagnosing and treating ASD. Cultural factors, including stigma and a lack of awareness, have made it difficult for families to seek early diagnosis and intervention. Historically, autism in Lebanon was often misunderstood, with children diagnosed with a range of other conditions, including intellectual disabilities or behavioral problems, rather than receiving a specific autism diagnosis. The social stigma surrounding disabilities, particularly those that affect social communication, has contributed to the reluctance of many families to seek professional help. Instead, alternative therapies or informal support networks may be more commonly utilized, further delaying diagnosis and intervention.

Additionally, Lebanon has limited resources for autism diagnosis and treatment. The healthcare system in Lebanon, though relatively advanced in urban areas, faces significant challenges in providing comprehensive care for children with autism. There are few specialized services available, and those that exist are often concentrated in Beirut or other major cities. Access to specialized professionals, such as pediatric neurologists, psychologists, and speech therapists, is limited in rural and less developed regions. This disparity results in unequal access to timely and appropriate care for children across Lebanon.

Cultural perceptions of autism in Lebanon also play a key role in shaping the experiences of individuals with ASD and their families. A study by Nasser and Harb (2016) examined the impact of cultural attitudes on the diagnosis of autism in Lebanon. The research highlighted that in some communities, autism was not widely recognized as a medical condition, and individuals with ASD were often seen as “difficult” or “misbehaving” rather than as individuals with a neurodevelopmental disorder. This lack of understanding and awareness has hindered efforts to provide effective services and support for children with autism and their families.

One of the most pressing issues in Lebanon is the underdiagnosis of ASD. According to a study by Nasr and colleagues (2014), many children with ASD in Lebanon are not diagnosed until they are well into their early school years, well beyond the ideal window for early intervention. This delay in diagnosis is often linked to the stigma surrounding the disorder, as well as a lack of awareness among healthcare professionals, educators, and the general public. Furthermore, there is no national registry for autism diagnoses in Lebanon, making it difficult to track the prevalence of the disorder or to provide a coordinated response to the needs of individuals with ASD.

The stigma surrounding autism remains a significant barrier to families seeking help. In Lebanon, individuals with disabilities, particularly those with developmental or behavioral challenges, have often been marginalized and excluded from mainstream society. The cultural perception of disability as a source of shame or family burden has led many parents to avoid seeking professional help for their children, often opting instead for unproven therapies or keeping the child's condition hidden from public view. The stigma associated with autism is compounded by a lack of public education about the disorder and its impact on

families and communities.

Another challenge is the limited availability of specialized services for children with autism. While there has been a gradual increase in the number of autism-related services in Lebanon, the country still lacks a robust system of early intervention, educational support, and healthcare services for individuals with ASD. There is a shortage of trained professionals who specialize in autism treatment, and many schools are not equipped to support children with ASD. This lack of specialized services is particularly acute in rural areas, where access to healthcare and education is limited.

Cultural perceptions of ASD in Lebanon and other Middle Eastern countries play a crucial role in shaping the experiences of individuals with the disorder. In a study by El-Baba (2013), cultural beliefs and societal attitudes toward disabilities were found to have a significant impact on how individuals with ASD were treated in Lebanon. The research indicated that children with ASD were often viewed through a lens of cultural stigma, with families and communities reluctant to acknowledge or accept the diagnosis. This cultural resistance to accepting autism as a medical condition has hindered efforts to integrate children with ASD into society and to provide the necessary support systems.

Additionally, surrounding countries in the Middle East have experienced similar cultural and healthcare challenges related to autism. In Saudi Arabia, for instance, autism awareness has grown in recent years, but challenges related to early diagnosis and public stigma still persist (Al-Ma'aitah *et al.*, 2011) [7]. Similar to Lebanon, cultural perceptions in many Middle Eastern countries have contributed to delays in diagnosis and a lack of proper intervention services.

Research on autism in Lebanon has increased in recent years, but significant gaps remain in the literature. Most studies have focused on raising awareness about autism, the challenges faced by families, and the availability of resources. Research on the effectiveness of intervention programs in Lebanon is limited, with few studies evaluating the outcomes of different therapeutic approaches.

Materials and Methods

Research Design

- **Quantitative Approach:** A structured survey was developed and distributed to healthcare professionals, educators, and parents of children with autism. The survey aimed to gather quantifiable data on the availability and quality of services, perceptions of autism diagnosis and treatment, and barriers to accessing care in Lebanon.
- **Qualitative Approach:** In-depth interviews were conducted with local experts, including pediatricians, psychologists, special education teachers, and autism advocacy group members. These interviews aimed to capture more nuanced perspectives on the challenges and opportunities for improving autism services in Lebanon. The qualitative data were analyzed using thematic analysis, which allowed for the identification of common themes and insights from expert views.
- **Literature Review:** A systematic review of academic studies, government health reports, and publications from autism advocacy groups was conducted to build a foundational understanding of the historical and current state of autism in Lebanon. This review helped to

contextualize the primary data collected and allowed for the identification of gaps in existing knowledge.

Data Collection

A structured questionnaire was designed to gather quantitative data from a sample of healthcare professionals (e.g., pediatricians, neurologists), educators (e.g., special education teachers, school counselors), and parents of children diagnosed with autism in Lebanon. The survey included questions on:

- The perceived availability of autism services in Lebanon.
- Knowledge and awareness of autism diagnosis and treatment protocols.
- Challenges faced in diagnosing and treating children with autism.
- Barriers to accessing appropriate care (e.g., financial, geographical, cultural).

The survey was distributed electronically to over 150 participants, ensuring a diverse representation from both urban and rural areas. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 10 local experts, including doctors, psychologists, educators, and representatives from autism advocacy groups. The interviews were designed to gather detailed insights into the following:

- The experiences and challenges faced by healthcare professionals and educators in diagnosing and treating ASD.
- The role of autism advocacy groups in raising awareness and providing resources.
- Expert opinions on how autism services can be improved in Lebanon.
- Cultural attitudes toward autism and how these affect families' willingness to seek professional help.

Data Analysis

Quantitative Data:

The survey data were analyzed using SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) to generate descriptive statistics and identify trends in the responses. Key variables such as the availability of autism services, knowledge about autism, and perceived barriers to care were analyzed using frequencies, means, and cross-tabulations. A chi-square test was used to compare responses from different demographic groups (e.g., healthcare professionals vs. parents, urban vs. rural).

Qualitative Data:

The interview data were analyzed using **thematic analysis**, a qualitative data analysis method that involves identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (or themes) within the data. Thematic analysis helped to uncover underlying themes related to the challenges faced by professionals and families, as well as cultural perceptions of autism. Transcripts of the interviews were coded manually and categorized based on emerging themes.

Table 1: Below illustrates the perceptions of healthcare professionals and parents regarding autism awareness and service availability.

Region	Perception of Awareness	Availability of Services
Urban	75% aware	80% availability
Rural	50% aware	35% availability

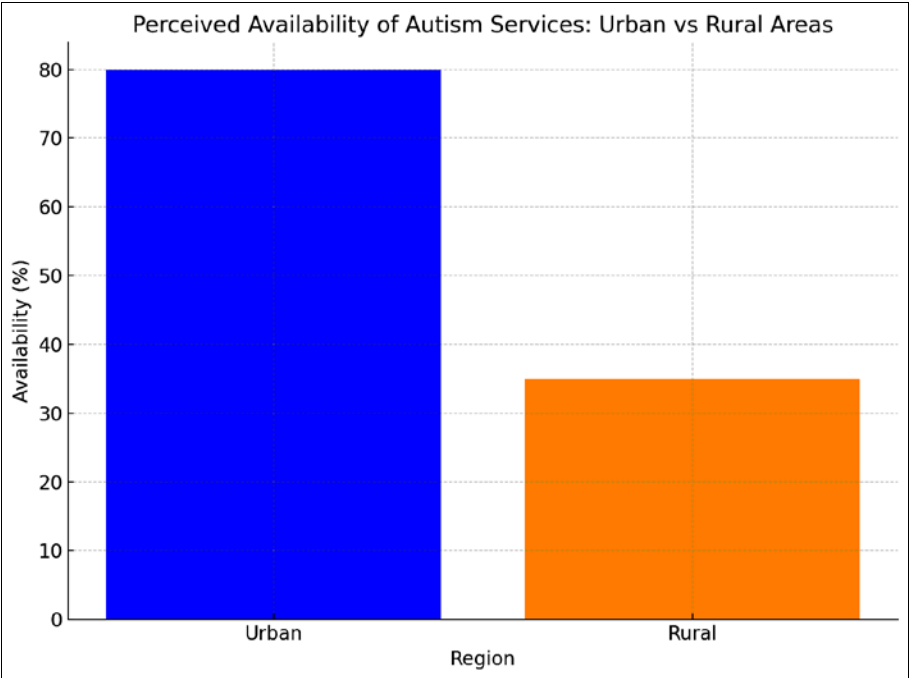


Fig 1: Shows a bar graph comparing the perceived availability of autism services between urban and rural areas.

Diagnostic and Treatment Challenges

Table 2: Compares the key challenges faced by healthcare professionals and parents in diagnosing and treating ASD in Lebanon.

Challenge	Healthcare Professionals (%)	Parents (%)
Early Diagnosis	70	60
Lack of Specialized Services	65	80
Cultural Stigma	45	70
Financial Barriers	40	50

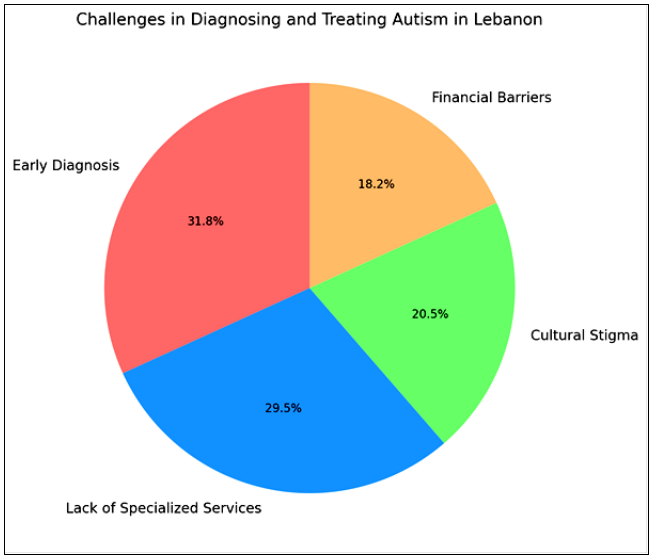


Fig 2: Visualizes these challenges in a pie chart.

6. Analysis and Comparison

When comparing Lebanon’s approach to autism with other Middle Eastern countries, it is clear that Lebanon faces unique challenges, particularly in terms of resources and public awareness. Countries such as the UAE and Saudi Arabia have made more significant strides in recognizing and addressing autism. In the UAE, for example, the

government has implemented national screening programs, and specialized centers for autism diagnosis and treatment have been established in major cities.

In contrast, Lebanon lacks a comprehensive, nationwide strategy for autism care, leading to fragmented services and unequal access across regions. While some private institutions and NGOs provide autism services in Lebanon, the public sector remains under-resourced in addressing the needs of individuals with ASD.

Compared to Western countries, Lebanon’s healthcare and educational systems are less equipped to handle ASD diagnoses and interventions. In the United States, the UK, and Canada, there is a robust framework of early diagnosis, intervention programs, and specialized educational services for individuals with autism. Public schools often integrate specialized support services for children with ASD, and there are national and local programs aimed at early intervention.

Lebanon, however, has limited specialized educational institutions for children with ASD. While there are some private schools that cater to children with autism, access to these services is largely dependent on the family’s financial resources. Additionally, the country’s healthcare system lacks sufficient professionals trained specifically in autism, and most healthcare providers have limited experience with diagnosing ASD in young children.

Cultural perceptions of autism in Lebanon significantly influence the diagnosis and treatment of the disorder. In many Middle Eastern cultures, including Lebanon, there is a tendency to attribute social and behavioral challenges to familial issues or personal failings, rather than recognizing them as part of a neurodevelopmental condition. This stigma surrounding autism has led to delayed diagnoses and a lack of appropriate interventions.

Studies, such as those by Nasser and Harb (2016), have highlighted that cultural resistance to accepting autism as a medical condition is prevalent in Lebanon. Families may avoid seeking professional help due to fears of societal judgment, and instead, may turn to alternative or traditional

treatments. This cultural barrier is compounded by the lack of a coordinated public health approach to autism, which further limits access to evidence-based interventions

Discussion

In Lebanon, the socio-political, healthcare, and cultural environment plays a crucial role in shaping how Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is diagnosed, treated, and perceived. While awareness of autism has grown, barriers persist due to a fragmented healthcare system, cultural stigma, and limited support services for individuals with ASD.

The healthcare system in Lebanon, while relatively advanced in urban centers, faces challenges in providing consistent, specialized care for autism, particularly in rural areas. Limited access to healthcare professionals trained in autism diagnosis and treatment contributes to delayed diagnoses and missed opportunities for early intervention. Additionally, cultural perceptions of autism often lead to families hesitating to seek professional help. Autism is frequently misunderstood and stigmatized, with many families choosing alternative treatments or avoiding diagnosis altogether due to fear of societal judgment.

The availability of resources is another significant factor impacting autism care in Lebanon. While private institutions and NGOs provide some autism services, the public sector remains underdeveloped, resulting in unequal access to services across different regions.

The challenges highlighted in this study—stigma, lack of early diagnosis, and an under-resourced healthcare system—are critical barriers to effective autism care in Lebanon. Stigma surrounding autism remains a major obstacle, with many families avoiding formal diagnosis due to fear of societal exclusion and cultural perceptions of disability as shameful. This reluctance to seek professional help often results in delayed diagnoses, limiting the effectiveness of interventions that could otherwise improve developmental outcomes.

The lack of early diagnosis is particularly concerning, as research consistently shows that early intervention can lead to substantial improvements in communication, social skills, and adaptive behavior. In Lebanon, however, most children are not diagnosed until they enter school, significantly reducing the impact of early intervention programs. The absence of standardized screening tools and training for healthcare professionals further exacerbates this issue.

Moreover, Lebanon's healthcare system is under-resourced when it comes to autism services. The shortage of trained professionals and the limited number of specialized autism treatment centers mean that many families must rely on private or NGO-run services, which may not be accessible or affordable for everyone. This results in disparities in care, with individuals in rural areas facing greater challenges in accessing services.

Integrating autism services within Lebanon's national healthcare system is essential to addressing the gaps in diagnosis, treatment, and support. Currently, autism care is fragmented, with a reliance on private institutions and NGOs, which creates an inequitable system where only those who can afford it have access to appropriate services. Incorporating autism services into the public healthcare system would ensure that all individuals with ASD, regardless of their financial means or geographic location, have access to timely and effective care. A national strategy

for autism diagnosis, treatment, and support would provide a cohesive framework for addressing the needs of individuals with autism, standardizing services, and improving outcomes. Additionally, the establishment of a national autism registry would help track cases of autism, monitor the effectiveness of interventions, and inform future policy decisions.

There are several key areas where Lebanon can improve its approach to autism diagnosis, treatment, and support. The development of a national autism policy is a critical step. This policy should include guidelines for early diagnosis, standardized treatment protocols, and the integration of autism services into the public healthcare system. Establishing clear national standards would help address disparities in care and ensure that all individuals with ASD have access to the support they need.

Public awareness campaigns are another important avenue for progress. Reducing stigma around autism is essential to encouraging families to seek diagnosis and treatment. National campaigns aimed at educating the public about the signs and symptoms of autism, as well as the benefits of early intervention, can help change societal attitudes toward autism. Additionally, autism education should be integrated into school curricula and healthcare professional training to foster a better understanding of the condition.

The expansion of intervention programs is also necessary to meet the growing demand for autism services. This includes increasing the availability of specialized educational programs, therapy services, and support networks for families. Special education services should be expanded, particularly in rural areas, to ensure that children with autism have the opportunity to receive an education tailored to their needs.

Recommendations for Improving Autism Services, Public Awareness, and Research in Lebanon

- 1. National Autism Strategy:** The Lebanese government should develop and implement a national autism strategy that includes early diagnosis, standardized treatment guidelines, and a system for integrating autism services into the public healthcare system.
- 2. Healthcare Professional Training:** Increased training for healthcare professionals in diagnosing and treating autism is essential. This training should include the latest research on autism diagnosis, therapeutic interventions, and culturally sensitive approaches to autism care.
- 3. Public Awareness Campaigns:** Public campaigns should focus on educating the population about autism, reducing stigma, and encouraging families to seek early diagnosis and intervention. These campaigns should target both the general public and specific groups, such as parents and healthcare providers.
- 4. Expanding Intervention Programs:** The availability of autism services, including early intervention programs, speech therapy, occupational therapy, and special education services, should be expanded. Efforts should be made to ensure that services are accessible in both urban and rural areas.
- 5. Research and Data Collection:** Lebanon should invest in autism research, focusing on the effectiveness of early intervention programs, the long-term outcomes of autism treatment, and the cultural factors that influence autism diagnosis and care. The development of a

national autism registry would be a significant step in this direction.

Conclusion

In Lebanon, significant challenges persist in the diagnosis, treatment, and support of individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). These challenges include cultural stigma, delayed diagnoses, and an under-resourced healthcare system, leading to disparities in access to specialized services. Despite growing awareness, many families in rural areas face barriers to obtaining timely and appropriate care, and the lack of a national autism strategy further complicates the situation. To address these issues, it is crucial to integrate autism services into the public healthcare system, expand early diagnosis and intervention programs, and reduce stigma through public awareness campaigns. The findings of this study highlight the need for a more coordinated approach to autism care, one that ensures equitable access to services across Lebanon. Future research should focus on long-term evaluations of intervention programs and explore how cultural perceptions influence the diagnosis and treatment of autism. Additionally, the integration of emerging technologies and evidence-based practices into national autism care programs could improve the quality of services and better meet the needs of individuals with ASD in Lebanon.

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