



ADVANCE SOCIAL SCIENCE ARCHIVE JOURNAL

Available Online: <https://assajournal.com>
 Vol. 05 No. 02. April-June 2026. Page# 1568-1580
 Print ISSN: [3006-2497](https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.20578350) Online ISSN: [3006-2500](https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.20578350)
 Platform & Workflow by: [Open Journal Systems](https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.20578350)
<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.20578350>



Caregiver Burden, Psychological Distress, and Social Rejection in Mothers of Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder

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ABSTRACT

The current study aims to observe the relationship between caregiver burden, psychological distress, and social rejection among mothers of children with autism. In addition, this research explores how demographic differences relate to caregiver burden, psychological distress, and social rejection among mothers of children with autism. A cross-sectional research design was used, and data were collected from 100 mothers of children with autism through purposive sampling. The Zarit Caregiver Burden Interview, Rejection Sensitivity Questionnaire (Adult Version), and Kessler Psychological Distress Scale (K-10) were administered. Pearson correlation, regression, independent t-test, and ANOVA were used for statistical analysis. Correlation and regression analyses showed that caregiver burden had a clear positive association with psychological distress, and it significantly predicted distress levels. Social rejection did not show a meaningful relationship with psychological distress and did not emerge as a significant predictor. The association between caregiver burden and social rejection was also non-significant. An exploratory comparison indicated that working mothers reported higher caregiver burden and psychological distress than household mothers, while no difference appeared in social rejection. The study highlights the psychological challenges faced by mothers of children with autism and emphasizes the need for interventions, awareness, and support systems.

Keywords. *Autism Spectrum Disorder, Caregiver Burden, Psychological Distress, Social Rejection, Mothers*

Introduction

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a pervasive neurodevelopmental condition characterized by impairments in social interaction, communication difficulties, and restricted or repetitive behaviors (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). ASD includes autism, Asperger syndrome, and other pervasive developmental disorders in which considerable behavioral, communicative, and social problems exist (Volkmar et al., 2014). Early recognition, assessment, and management are essential because they influence long-term developmental outcomes and functional

independence (Howlin et al., 2014). Despite this, many children with ASD require lifelong support, and families, particularly mothers, serve as the primary caregivers.

Caregiving for a child with ASD is associated with substantial emotional, physical, and social challenges. Mothers often experience high levels of stress, financial strain, and disruptions in family functioning (Gaugler et al., 2004). Research consistently shows that parents of children with ASD report higher caregiver burden than parents of children with other neurodevelopmental conditions (Cadman et al., 2012). Recent evidence further confirms that mothers of autistic children experience significantly higher psychological distress, anxiety, and depressive symptoms than other caregiver groups (Alnazly & Abojedi, 2019; Udoh et al., 2021). A 2024 study also found that female caregivers report significantly higher subjective burden and emotional strain than male caregivers, highlighting gendered caregiving expectations (García-López et al., 2024).

Psychological distress—defined as emotional suffering characterized by symptoms of anxiety and depression (Arvidsdotter et al., 2016) is common among caregivers of autistic children. Distress is often linked to the child's behavioral difficulties, communication challenges, and the chronic nature of ASD symptoms (Mohammed, 2015). Social rejection and stigma further intensify caregiver distress. Social rejection refers to others' unwillingness to include an individual in social groups or relationships (DeWall & Bushman, 2011). Parents of autistic children frequently report stigmatization, judgment, and exclusion from social settings (Papadopoulos, 2021). Recent research shows that internalized stigma significantly predicts parental stress and depressive symptoms, making stigma a critical determinant of caregiver mental health (Zhou et al., 2023). In Pakistan, where cultural expectations emphasize maternal caregiving and social conformity, mothers of autistic children may experience unique challenges, including limited support, social isolation, and heightened stigma. Therefore, understanding the relationship between caregiver burden, psychological distress, and social rejection is essential for developing culturally appropriate interventions. The present study aims to examine these relationships and explore how demographic factors influence the experiences of mothers of children with ASD.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Caregiver Burden in Mothers of Children with ASD

Caregiver burden refers to the emotional, physical, financial, and social strain experienced by individuals providing long-term care (Mourya & Singh, 2016). Parents of children with ASD often experience overwhelming responsibilities due to the child's communication difficulties, behavioral challenges, and need for constant supervision (Nunes Misquiatti et al., 2015). Studies consistently show that caregiver burden is significantly higher among parents of children with ASD compared to parents of children with other neurodevelopmental disorders (Cadman et al., 2012).

Recent research reinforces these findings. A 2024 gender-based study reported that caregivers of autistic individuals, especially mothers experience significantly higher objective and subjective burden than caregivers of individuals with other chronic conditions (García-López et al., 2024). Similarly, a large-scale cohort study found that autism caregivers report higher stress, anxiety, and depressive symptoms than non-autism caregivers (Zhou et al., 2023). Caregiver burden is influenced by symptom severity, coping strategies, and social support (Stuart & McGrew, 2019). Mothers often report emotional exhaustion, financial strain, and reduced quality of life (Marsack-Topolewski & Church, 2019).

Psychological Distress Among Parents of Children with ASD

Psychological distress is prevalent among caregivers of autistic children due to persistent caregiving demands and limited societal support. Parenting stress is strongly associated with

psychological distress, and mothers of children with ASD report higher stress levels than mothers of typically developing children (Jiar & Xi, 2012). Parents of children with ASD also report higher parenting-related stress than parents of children with developmental delays or typical development (Estes et al., 2013).

Recent studies confirm these patterns. A 2024 thematic analysis identified emotional strain, stigmatization, financial pressure, and physical exhaustion as core contributors to caregiver distress (García-López et al., 2024). During the COVID-19 pandemic, parents of children with ASD reported significantly elevated anxiety and depression compared to parents of typically developing children (Wand et al., 2021). Emotional and behavioral problems in autistic children are strong predictors of parental psychological distress (York et al., 2018).

Social Rejection, Stigma, and Caregiving

Social rejection and stigma are major challenges for parents of children with ASD. Stigma includes negative societal attitudes, exclusion, and judgment, which contribute to emotional strain and reduced social participation (Kinnear et al., 2016). Mothers often report avoiding social gatherings due to fear of judgment, consistent with qualitative findings showing that social isolation is a central component of caregiver distress (Papadopoulos, 2021).

Recent research highlights the psychological impact of stigma. Internalized stigma mediates the relationship between ASD severity and parental depression, indicating that societal attitudes directly influence caregiver mental health (Zhou et al., 2023). Stigma also reduces help-seeking behaviors and increases caregiver burden (del-Pino-Casado et al., 2018). In Saudi Arabia, mothers reported higher levels of self-stigma and enacted stigma than fathers, demonstrating gendered differences in societal expectations (Alshaigi et al., 2020).

RATIONALE OF THE STUDY

The current study examines the correlation between caregiver burden, social rejection, and psychological distress among mothers of children with autism. Understanding these relationships helps psychologists and health professionals develop better interventions and support programs. Mothers often experience isolation, stress, and stigmatization, and this research highlights the need for awareness and therapeutic support.

HYPOTHESES

The Hypotheses of the present study are:

H1: There will be a positive relationship between caregiver burden and psychological distress.

H2: There will be a relationship between social rejection and psychological distress.

H3: There will be a relationship between caregiver burden and social rejection.

H4: Caregiver burden will significantly predict psychological distress.

H5: Social rejection will not significantly predict psychological distress.

H6: Working mothers will differ from household mothers in caregiver burden, psychological distress, and social rejection.

METHOD

Research Design

The cross-sectional research design was used in the present study.

Sampling technique

Data was collected from the mother of children with autism by using the purposive sampling technique.

Sample

The sample of 100 mothers of children with autism was included in the present study through the purposive sampling technique. Mothers of children with autism from age 6 to 12 with all severity levels (mild, moderate, severe) was included.

Inclusion criteria

- Mothers of children with autism were included in the present study.
- Only families having a child with the neurodevelopmental disorder, which is an autism spectrum disorder were included in the study.
- Working and household mothers was included.
- Mothers of children in autistic centers of Lahore was included.

Exclusion criteria

- Mothers with more than one child with an autism spectrum disorder or other neurodevelopmental disorder was not included in the study.
- Fathers and any other caregiver except the mother excluded.

Instruments

The measuring scales that were used in this study are informed consent form, demographic sheet, Zarit caregiver burden interview (ZBI), Kessler psychological distress scale (k-10) and Rejection sensitivity questioner, adult version(A-RSQ). Urdu translated versions of all the scales were administered on the mothers of children with autism.

1. **Informed consent** was given to the participant in which explain that gather information from mothers is only purpose of the research and insure them that their information not be used any other purpose. Participant had option off either declining participation or agreeing to continue. Participation is totally depended on participants willingness.
2. **Demographic sheet** included mother’s name, gender, age, education, occupation, marital status, family system, number of family members, total earning members, monthly income, number of children, number of autistic children, gender of autistic children, duration of illness and number of mentally or physically ill children recorded on the demographic sheet.
3. Zarit Caregiver Burden Interview (22 items; Zarit et al., 1980).
4. Rejection Sensitivity Questionnaire, Adult Version (9 items; Downey & Feldman, 1996)
5. Kessler Psychological Distress Scale (K-10; Kessler et al., 2002).

Procedure

The current study looked into the link between caregiver burden, social rejection and psychological distress among mothers of children with autism. Three standard measures were used in this study to find the relationship between selected variables. For the collection of data, permission was granted from the institute and also from the participants. The questionnaire was given to participants by a personal approach.

The consent form fills the first portion, and the demographic information form was the second portion of the questionnaire. Demographic information of the respondents in terms of 100 participants was obtained from mothers. After the completion of the questionnaire, the researcher rechecked for any left item. In the end, the participants and authorities of the institute were heartily thanked for their cooperation. Then the collected data was analyzed through SPSS 25 to draw results.

Statistical Analysis

SPSS-25 was used. Correlation, regression, t-tests, and ANOVA were conducted.

RESULTS

Demographic Characteristics

Table 1

Demographic Characteristics of the participant’s (N=100)

Variables	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)
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Gender			
Female	100		100
Age			
25-35	69		69.0
36-50	31		31.0
Education			
Matric	25		25.0
Intermediate	14		14.0
Bachelor	38		38.0
Master	23		23.0
Marital status			
Married	95		95.0
Widow	1		1.0
Divorced	4		4.0
Duration of marriage			
5-10	62		62.0
11-20	35		35.0
21-30	3		3.0
Occupation			
Household	73		73.0
Working	27		27.0
Monthly income			
10-25	4		4.0
26-40	14		14.0
41-60	51		51.0
60 above	31		31.0
Family system			
Nuclear	61		61.0
Joint	39		39.0
Earning member			
1	63		63.0
2	28		28.0
3	5		5.0
4	4		4.0
Number of children			
1	14		14.0
2	34		34.0
3	31		31.0
4	14		14.0
5	2		2.0
6	2		2.0
7	1		1.0
8	2		2.0
Birth order of autistic children			
1	47		47.0

2	26	26.0
3	19	19.0
4	5	5.0
5	1	1.0
6	2	2.0
Age of autistic children		
6-9	87	87.0
10-12	13	13.0
Gender of autistic children		
Girl		
Boy	64	64.0
Number of mentally or physically ill children		
	36	36.0
	100	100.0

Table 2
Psychometric properties of the used scales

Variable	Items	Alpha
ZBI	22	0.834
K-10	10	0.725
ARSQ	18	.918

Note: ZBI, Zarit caregiver burden scale, K-10, Kesler psychological distress scale, ARSQ. adult-rejection sensitivity scale.

Cronbach's alpha of the instrument employed in this study indicates that the current sample is reliable and valid.

Correlation Analysis

To test H1, H2, and H3, a combined Pearson correlation matrix was computed for caregiver burden, psychological distress, and social rejection.

Table 3
Correlations among caregiver burden, social rejection, and psychological distress (N = 100)

Measures	1	2	3
1. Caregiver Burden	—	-.167	.356***
2. Social Rejection		—	-.041
3. Psychological Distress			—

***p < .001

The correlation matrix was computed using the Pearson Product Moment Correlation to examine the relationships among caregiver burden, social rejection, and psychological distress among mothers of children with autism spectrum disorder.

Results indicate that caregiver burden has a significant moderate positive relationship with psychological distress ($r = .356, p < .001$), suggesting that higher levels of caregiver burden are associated with increased psychological distress.

In contrast, social rejection was not significantly related to psychological distress ($r = -.041, p = .688$), indicating no meaningful association between these variables in the current sample.

Similarly, caregiver burden and social rejection showed a negative but non-significant relationship ($r = -.167, p > .05$), implying that these variables are not significantly associated.

Overall, the findings support Hypothesis 1, while Hypotheses 2 and 3 are not supported, as the relationships involving social rejection were found to be non-significant. These results indicate that caregiver burden is meaningfully associated with psychological distress, whereas social rejection is not.

Regression Analysis

To test H4, a simple linear regression was conducted.

Table 4

Simple linear Regression between caregiver burden and psychological distress

Variable	Model (ER)						
	B	SE	β	R^2	AR^2	F	p
Caregiver burden	.211	.056	.356	.126	.118	14.183	.000

Note. N = 100; CI = confidence interval

*** $p < 0.001$

Regression analysis was used to test if caregiver burden predicts psychological distress. The result of the regression analysis indicated the overall model was significant ($F(1,98) = 14.183, p = .000$) and the predictor explained 12.6% of the variance in the outcome variable ($R = .356, R^2 = .126$). It was found that caregiver burden significantly predicted psychological distress ($\beta = .356, p = .000$).

To test H5, a regression analysis was conducted.

Table 5

Simple linear Regression between social rejection and psychological distress

Variable	Model (ER)						
	B	SE	β	R^2	AR^2	F	p

Social rejection	-.047	.117	-.041	.002	-.009	.162	.688
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Note. N = 100; CI = confidence interval
 p=ns

Regression analysis was used to test if social rejection predicts psychological distress. The result of the regression analysis indicated the overall model was non-significant (F (1,98) = .162, p = .688) and the predictor explained 0.2% of the variance in the outcome variable (R = .041, R² = .002) it was found that social rejection non significantly predicted psychological distress (β = -.041, p = .688)

To test H6, an independent samples t-test was conducted.

Table 6

Independent Sample t-test measuring caregiver burden, psychological distress and social rejection differences in working mothers and house hold mothers of children with autism spectrum disorder.

Variable	WM	HM	t (98)	95%CL		Cohen's d
	M(SD)	M(SD)		LL	UL	
CB	53.84(8.87)	48.63(10.77)	-2.24*	-9.82	-.61	0.52
PD	33.88(4.03)	31.7(6.80)	-	-4.90	.63	0.38
SR	16.30(5.32)	1.53** 16.87(5.45)	.470	-1.84	2.99	0.10

Note. N = 100, CB=caregiver burden, SR=social rejection, PD= psychological distress, WM= working mothers of children with autism, HM= house hold mothers with autism
 *p<.05, **p<.01, p=ns

T-test for independent sample was used to assess psychological distress, caregiver burden and social rejection difference between working and household mothers of children with autism spectrum disorder. Results shows that working mothers more psychological distress (M=33.88, SD=4.03) as compare to house hold mothers (M= 31.75, SD= 6.80), (t (98) = -1.531, p=.002) and effect size was medium d= 0.38 Moreover, house wife more socially rejected (M=16.87, SD= 5.45) as compare to working mothers (M=16.30, SD=5.32), (t (98) =.470, p=.642) and effect size was small d = 0.10. And working mother faced more care giver burden (M=53.84, SD=8.87) as compare to household mother (M=48.63, SD=10.77), (t (98) = -2.249, p =.069) and effect size was medium d = 0.52. These findings provide exploratory insight into occupational differences among mothers of children with ASD.

DISCUSSION

The present study examined the relationship between caregiver burden, psychological distress, and social rejection among mothers of children with autism, along with predictive effects and

exploratory occupational differences. The findings revealed a significant positive relationship between caregiver burden and psychological distress, supporting the first hypothesis. This result aligns with previous research indicating that parents of children with ASD experience high levels of stress, emotional strain, and psychological difficulties due to the continuous demands of caregiving (Alnazly & Abojedi, 2019; Cadman et al., 2012). Recent studies also confirm that caregiver burden is strongly associated with anxiety, depression, and overall psychological distress among mothers of autistic children (García-López et al., 2024; Zhou et al., 2023). The current findings reinforce the notion that the emotional and physical demands of caregiving significantly impact maternal mental health.

The second hypothesis, which proposed a relationship between social rejection and psychological distress, was not supported. The correlation between social rejection and psychological distress was non-significant. This finding contrasts with earlier studies suggesting that stigma, social exclusion, and negative societal attitudes contribute to emotional distress among caregivers (Papadopoulos, 2021; Kinnear et al., 2016). However, some recent research indicates that the impact of social rejection may vary depending on cultural context, coping strategies, and family support systems (Alshaigi et al., 2020). In collectivistic societies, extended family networks may buffer the effects of social rejection, which could explain the non-significant association observed in this study.

The third hypothesis, which predicted a relationship between caregiver burden and social rejection, was also not supported. The correlation between these variables was negative but non-significant. This finding contradicts earlier literature suggesting that stigma and social exclusion increase caregiver burden by limiting social support and increasing emotional strain (del-Pino-Casado et al., 2018). One possible explanation is that mothers in the current sample may have developed resilience or coping mechanisms that reduce the impact of social rejection on their caregiving experience. Alternatively, the severity of caregiving demands may overshadow the influence of social rejection, making burden more strongly tied to the child's needs than to external social factors.

Regression analyses further clarified these relationships. Caregiver burden significantly predicted psychological distress, supporting the fourth hypothesis. This finding is consistent with previous studies demonstrating that the intensity of caregiving responsibilities is a strong predictor of maternal mental health outcomes (Marsack-Topolewski & Church, 2019; Stuart & McGrew, 2019). The predictive strength of caregiver burden highlights the need for interventions that reduce caregiving strain, enhance coping skills, and provide structured support for mothers of children with ASD.

In contrast, social rejection did not significantly predict psychological distress, supporting the fifth hypothesis. This result aligns with the correlation findings and suggests that, within this sample, social rejection may not be a primary determinant of psychological distress. Some studies have reported similar patterns, indicating that while stigma is emotionally painful, it may not always translate into measurable psychological distress when caregivers have strong family support or adaptive coping strategies (York et al., 2018). However, this finding contradicts research showing that internalized stigma significantly predicts parental depression and stress (Zhou et al., 2023). These mixed findings indicate that the role of social rejection may be context-dependent and influenced by cultural norms, social support, and personal resilience.

The exploratory analysis comparing working and household mothers revealed significant differences in caregiver burden and psychological distress, with working mothers reporting higher levels of both. This finding aligns with studies suggesting that balancing employment with caregiving responsibilities increases stress and emotional strain (García-López et al., 2024). Working mothers may experience role overload, time pressure, and reduced opportunities for rest, contributing to higher burden and distress. However, no significant difference was found in social rejection, suggesting that occupational status does not influence the extent to which mothers experience stigma or exclusion. This aligns with research indicating that stigma related to ASD is often directed toward the child and family as a whole, regardless of maternal employment status (Papadopoulos, 2021).

Overall, the findings highlight the central role of caregiver burden in shaping psychological distress among mothers of children with ASD. While social rejection is an important social factor, it did not emerge as a significant predictor in this study. The results underscore the need for targeted interventions that reduce caregiving strain, enhance coping resources, and provide psychological support to mothers. Future research should explore cultural moderators, family dynamics, and resilience factors that may influence the relationship between social rejection and psychological distress.

CONCLUSION

The present study examined the relationships among caregiver burden, psychological distress, and social rejection among mothers of children with autism, and explored whether caregiver burden and social rejection predicted psychological distress. The findings demonstrated that caregiver burden was strongly associated with psychological distress, and it emerged as a significant predictor of distress. These results are consistent with previous research showing that the emotional and physical demands of caring for a child with ASD place mothers at heightened risk for anxiety, depression, and overall psychological strain (Alnazly & Abojedi, 2019; García-López et al., 2024; Zhou et al., 2023). The predictive strength of caregiver burden underscores its central role in shaping maternal mental health and highlights the need for targeted interventions that reduce caregiving strain and enhance coping resources.

In contrast, social rejection did not show a significant relationship with psychological distress and did not predict distress in the regression model. This finding contradicts earlier studies suggesting that stigma and social exclusion contribute to emotional suffering among caregivers (Papadopoulos, 2021; Kinnear et al., 2016). However, it aligns with more recent evidence indicating that the impact of social rejection may vary depending on cultural context, family support, and resilience factors (Alshaigi et al., 2020). In collectivistic societies, extended family networks and shared caregiving responsibilities may buffer the psychological effects of social rejection, which may explain the non-significant associations observed in this study.

The exploratory analysis revealed that working mothers experienced significantly higher caregiver burden and psychological distress than household mothers. This finding supports research showing that balancing employment with intensive caregiving responsibilities increases stress and emotional exhaustion (García-López et al., 2024). However, no difference was found in social rejection, suggesting that stigma related to ASD may be directed toward the family as a whole rather than influenced by maternal employment status.

Overall, the study highlights caregiver burden as the most influential factor affecting psychological distress among mothers of children with ASD. While social rejection remains an important social challenge, it did not emerge as a significant predictor of distress in this sample. These findings emphasize the need for culturally informed interventions that reduce caregiving strain, strengthen coping strategies, and provide psychological support for mothers. Future research should examine the role of cultural norms, family dynamics, and resilience processes in shaping how social rejection influences caregiver well-being.

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