

Parental Perceptions of the Impact of Having a Child with Autism Spectrum Disorder on Siblings' Marriage Prospects: A Field Study in Ramallah, Palestine

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Abstract

This study examined parental perceptions of how having a child with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) may influence the marriage prospects of other children in the same family in Ramallah, Palestine. The topic is socially sensitive in a context where marriage remains closely tied to family reputation, kinship networks, and long-term social security. A descriptive-analytical design was used. Data were collected from 50 parents of children with ASD through a structured questionnaire covering demographic characteristics and four substantive domains: psychological impact, social impact, economic burden, and family adaptation. Descriptive analysis showed consistently high levels of psychological stress, future-oriented worry, and emotional exhaustion among parents. Respondents also reported substantial social pressure, including reduced participation in community life, perceived lack of social acceptance, and concern that the presence of a child with ASD could negatively affect the marriage opportunities of siblings. Economic strain was another prominent pattern, with families reporting heavy therapy and rehabilitation costs and, in some cases, reduced work participation by one caregiver. At the same time, many families described adaptive responses, including shared caregiving responsibilities, the development of coping strategies, and stronger internal family solidarity. The findings suggest that the perceived effect on siblings' marriage prospects is shaped less by autism itself than by stigma, misconceptions about heredity, and community attitudes toward disability. The paper recommends awareness initiatives, psychosocial support for families, and policy measures that reduce stigma and strengthen inclusion in Palestinian society.

Keywords: Autism Spectrum Disorder, Marriage Prospects, Siblings, Stigma, Family Reputation, Palestine, Ramallah.

Introduction

Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is a neurodevelopmental condition characterized by persistent differences in social communication and social interaction, together with restricted or repetitive patterns of behavior, interests, or activities (American Psychiatric Association, 2022; Lord et al., 2020). Although the clinical features of ASD are well established, the broader consequences of the diagnosis are not confined to the child alone. Across many contexts, the presence of a child with ASD influences the emotional well-being, social positioning, daily routines, and financial capacity of the whole family.

In Arab societies, family life is often embedded in dense social networks in which kinship, reputation, and marriage carry considerable cultural weight. In such contexts, disability may become a family matter rather than only an individual one. Concerns about stigma, heredity, social judgment, and future security can extend beyond the diagnosed child and affect siblings as well. This issue is especially salient in relation to marriage, because marriage is not only a personal decision but also a social process shaped by the perceived standing of the family.

In Ramallah, Palestine, marriage continues to be strongly associated with family respectability, social acceptance, and long-term stability. As a result, parents may worry that the presence of a child with ASD could influence how the family is viewed by relatives, neighbours, and prospective in-laws. These concerns may be heightened by misconceptions about autism, including beliefs that the condition is hereditary in a simple deterministic sense, that it reflects a "problem" in the family, or that it undermines the marriageability of brothers and sisters. Such perceptions may not always be openly expressed, yet they can influence family decisions, proposal negotiations, and social relationships.

Previous studies have documented the psychological strain, social isolation, and economic burden experienced by families of children with ASD in different settings (Begum & Mamin, 2019; Mohanna, 2020; Muhsen, 2024). However, the specific question of how these pressures intersect with siblings' marriage prospects has received much less empirical attention, particularly in Palestine. The present study addresses this gap by examining parental perceptions in Ramallah. It does not claim to measure actual marriage outcomes directly; rather, it explores how parents understand the relationship between autism-related family circumstances and the future marital opportunities of other children in the household.

By focusing on this issue, the study contributes to a more culturally grounded understanding of autism, family life, and stigma in Palestine. It also highlights how social attitudes toward disability can affect families in ways that are not immediately visible in clinical or educational research.

Research Problem

Despite growing interest in the family impacts of ASD, the Ramallah context still lacks focused empirical work on whether and how the presence of a child with ASD is perceived to affect the marriage prospects of siblings. The problem addressed in this study is therefore the limited understanding of how stigma, cultural beliefs, economic strain, and family reputation interact in shaping parental concerns about siblings' future marriage opportunities.

Research Objectives

- To determine the extent to which parents perceive that having a child with ASD influences the marriage opportunities of other children in the family.
- To identify the main social and cultural factors associated with these perceptions.

- To examine common manifestations of the perceived impact, including delayed marriage, hesitation from potential suitors, or reduced opportunities.
- To consider whether parents perceive differences in impact according to gender and broader family circumstances.
- To propose practical recommendations for families, professionals, and community institutions.

Research Questions

- To what extent does the presence of a child with ASD in the family influence the marriage opportunities of siblings in Ramallah, Palestine?
- What social and cultural factors are associated with marriage opportunities in families that have a child with ASD?
- Are there gender-based differences in the perceived impact on the marriage opportunities of siblings?
- How do economic, educational, and social factors shape this relationship?
- What community attitudes are perceived by parents toward marriage into families that include a child diagnosed with ASD?

Significance of the Study

This study is significant because it investigates a socially sensitive but underexplored aspect of autism in Palestine. Much of the existing literature on ASD focuses on diagnosis, intervention, education, or caregiver burden. By contrast, this paper examines how disability may shape family reputation and social opportunity within a marriage-oriented cultural framework.

The study also has practical relevance. Its findings can inform awareness campaigns, counselling services, social work practice, and policy initiatives aimed at reducing stigma and supporting families. In addition, it provides an empirical starting point for future studies in other Palestinian communities and in comparable Arab contexts.

Key Terms

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD):

A neurodevelopmental disorder characterized by persistent difficulties in social communication and social interaction, together with restricted and repetitive patterns of behaviour, interests, or activities (American Psychiatric Association, 2022; Lord et al., 2020).

Marriage Prospects:

The perceived or actual opportunities for siblings in a family to enter marriage within their social and cultural context, including the role of family reputation, community acceptance, and disability-related

attitudes.

Social Stigma:

Negative beliefs, prejudices, and social evaluations directed at individuals or families associated with disability, which may affect social participation, reputation, and opportunity.

Conceptual and Empirical Background

Autism, Family Life, and Social Meaning:

Autism affects family life in multiple and interconnected ways. International and regional studies consistently show elevated levels of parental stress, changes in family routines, financial pressure, and altered sibling roles (Begum & Mamin, 2019; Garrido et al., 2020; Mokoena & Kern, 2022). The family often becomes the primary site of care, advocacy, and adaptation, especially where specialist services are limited or difficult to access.

In Palestine, these pressures may be intensified by economic uncertainty, uneven service availability, and the central role of the extended family in everyday life. Families may therefore confront autism not only as a developmental condition but also as a social reality that influences how the family is perceived and treated in the wider community.

Marriage, Reputation, and Stigma in Collectivist Contexts:

In societies where marriage is closely linked to kinship, honour, and family continuity, social evaluations of the family can shape the opportunities available to sons and daughters. Disability-related stigma may affect marriage negotiations through assumptions about heredity, family burden, or future caregiving obligations (de Leeuw et al., 2020; Laghi et al., 2018). These perceptions are not necessarily based on accurate knowledge about autism; rather, they often reflect broader cultural narratives about normality, health, and family desirability.

This does not mean that all families respond in the same way or that all communities reject families of children with ASD. Nevertheless, where social stigma persists, the concern that autism could affect siblings' marriage prospects becomes understandable. Such concern may be particularly strong for daughters in settings where women's marital opportunities are more closely scrutinized through family background.

Previous Studies

Existing studies have shown that families of children with ASD frequently report anxiety, social isolation, economic pressure, and strain on family relationships. Research in Palestine and neighbouring contexts has documented high levels of caregiver burden and reduced quality of life among parents, particularly mothers (Mohanna, 2020; Muhsen, 2024). Other studies have examined sibling experiences, showing that siblings may experience both emotional strain and the development of empathy, maturity, and responsibility (Ben-Itzhak et al., 2019; Mokoena & Kern, 2022).

Studies also suggest that the severity of stress within the family may be linked to the availability of social support and to broader cultural responses to disability (He et al., 2022; Rabi & Sebai, 2021). However, most of this research focuses on caregiver stress, family adaptation, or the developmental outcomes of the child with autism. Far fewer studies directly address the social consequences for siblings' future life chances, including marriage.

The literature therefore points to an important gap: while autism-related stigma has been discussed in relation to family burden and social participation, the specific issue of siblings' marriage prospects in Palestinian society remains insufficiently explored. The present study responds to this gap by examining parental perceptions in Ramallah.

Methodology

The study used a descriptive-analytical design. This design was selected because the research question concerns parental perceptions of a socially sensitive phenomenon rather than clinical or experimental outcomes. The intention was to describe patterns in parental responses and to interpret those patterns in light of the social and cultural context of Ramallah.

The study population comprised parents in Ramallah, Palestine, who had at least one child clinically diagnosed with ASD. A purposive sample of 50 parents was included. The sample was intended to capture variation in gender, age, educational level, marital status, and number of children in order to provide a broader view of family experiences.

Data were collected through a structured questionnaire developed from the study aims and the relevant literature. The questionnaire contained a demographic section and four substantive domains: psychological impact, social impact, economic impact, and family adaptation. Responses were recorded using a five-point Likert scale ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree.

Because the focus of the study is the perceived influence of autism on siblings' marriage prospects, the instrument did not treat marriage as an isolated variable. Instead, it examined marriage-related concern as embedded within wider family experiences of stigma, economic strain, and social acceptance. This design reflects the assumption that perceptions of marriage opportunity are shaped by the broader family environment.

Data analysis relied on descriptive statistics. Frequencies and percentages were used to summarize the sample characteristics and response patterns. Given the exploratory nature of the study and the modest sample size, the analysis is presented primarily as an account of trends rather than as a basis for broad generalization.

Ethical Considerations:

Participation was voluntary. Parents were informed about the purpose of the study and the academic use of the data before completing the questionnaire. No identifying personal information was reported in the analysis, and the findings are presented in aggregate form in order to protect confidentiality.

Because the topic concerns family reputation, social stigma, and marriage prospects, particular care was taken in reporting the findings in a respectful and non-identifying manner. The study aims to analyse stigma, not to reproduce it.

Results

The results are presented first through demographic characteristics and then through four substantive domains: psychological impact, social impact, economic impact, and family adaptation.

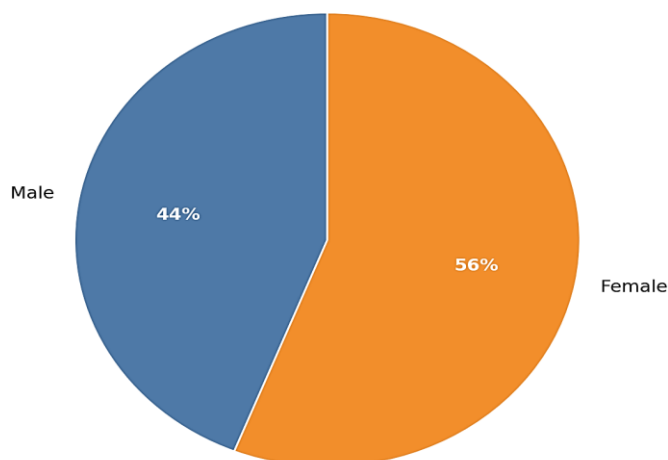
Demographic Characteristics of the Respondents:

The sample included 50 respondents. Women constituted a slight majority (56%), while men represented 44%. The largest age group was 25–34 years (32%), followed by 35–44 years (28%). Most respondents were married (60%), and 44% had a university education or higher. Families with three to four children formed the largest group (40%), followed by those with five or more children (36%). Overall, the demographic profile suggests that the findings reflect the views of parents at different life stages and educational levels, although the sample remains relatively small.

Table (1): Demographic characteristics of the respondents

Percentage (%)	Frequency (N)	Category	Variable
44%	22	Male	Gender
56%	28	Female	Gender
24%	12	Less than 25	Age
32%	16	25–34	Age
28%	14	35–44	Age
16%	8	45 and above	Age
60%	30	Married	Marital Status
30%	15	Single	Marital Status
6%	3	Divorced	Marital Status
4%	2	Widowed	Marital Status
10%	5	Primary	Educational Level
16%	8	Preparatory	Educational Level
30%	15	Secondary	Educational Level
44%	22	University or higher	Educational Level
24%	12	1–2	Number of Children
40%	20	3–4	Number of Children
36%	18	5 or more	Number of Children

Respondent Gender Distribution



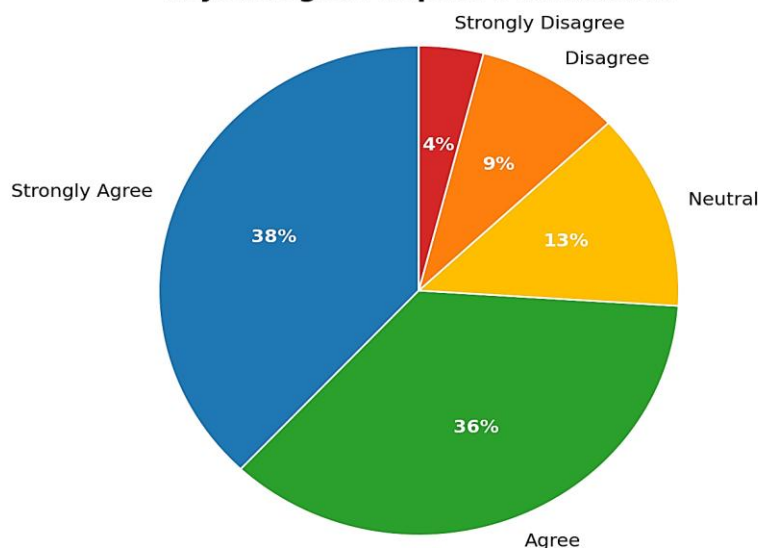
Psychological Impact:

The psychological dimension showed consistently high levels of distress. For the first three items, 76% of respondents selected either strongly agree or agree, indicating substantial psychological pressure, ongoing worry about the future of the child with ASD, and emotional exhaustion associated with care. Even the least endorsed item in this domain—sadness or depression—still received agreement from 68% of respondents. These results indicate that parental concern is not episodic but embedded in daily family life.

Table (2): Psychological impact of having a child with ASD

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	Statement
2 (4%)	4 (8%)	6 (12%)	20 (40%)	18 (36%)	I feel psychological pressure due to having a child with autism.
2 (4%)	4 (8%)	6 (12%)	18 (36%)	20 (40%)	I constantly worry about the future of my autistic child.
2 (4%)	4 (8%)	6 (12%)	16 (32%)	22 (44%)	I experience psychological exhaustion when dealing with my child's needs.
2 (4%)	6 (12%)	8 (16%)	18 (36%)	16 (32%)	Having a child with autism causes me sadness or depression.

Psychological Impact Distribution



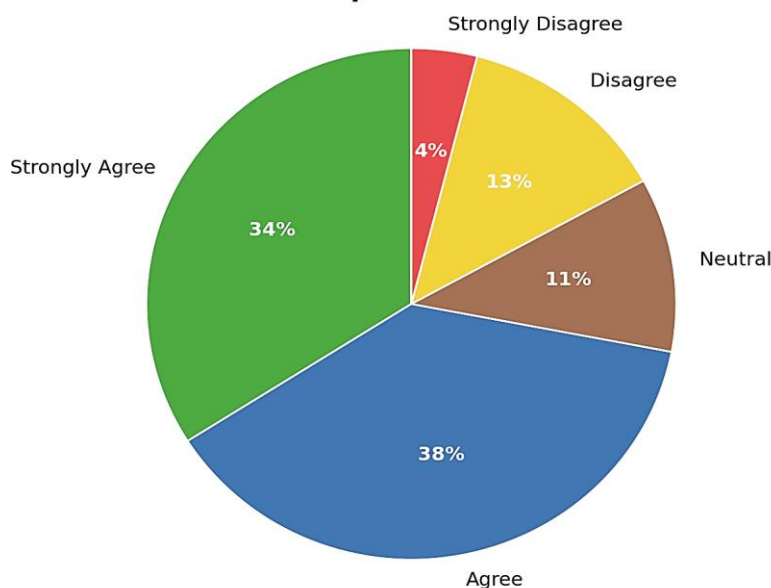
Social Impact and Perceived Effect on Siblings' Marriage Prospects:

The social domain also revealed strong agreement across items. Eighty percent of respondents agreed that childcare responsibilities made participation in social activities difficult, and 72% agreed that society did not fully accept their family. Most relevant to the study's main focus, 68% agreed that having a child with autism negatively affected the marriage opportunities of other children in the family, while only 20% disagreed. This pattern suggests that parental perceptions of siblings' marriage prospects are closely tied to community attitudes, social stigma, and reduced social participation.

Table (3): Social impact of having a child with ASD

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	Statement
2 (4%)	8 (16%)	6 (12%)	20 (40%)	14 (28%)	Having a child with autism affects my relationships with relatives.
2 (4%)	4 (8%)	4 (8%)	22 (44%)	18 (36%)	I face difficulties in participating in social activities due to childcare responsibilities.
2 (4%)	6 (12%)	6 (12%)	16 (32%)	20 (40%)	I feel that society does not fully accept my family.
2 (4%)	8 (16%)	6 (12%)	18 (36%)	16 (32%)	There is a negative impact on the marriage opportunities of other children in the family.

Social Impact Distribution



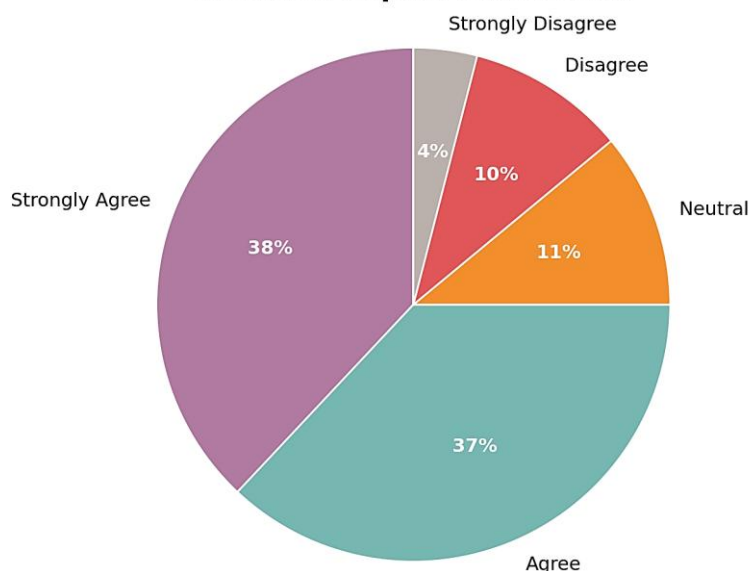
Economic Impact:

The economic findings indicate that autism-related care is experienced as a major financial burden. Eighty percent of respondents agreed that caring for a child with autism requires substantial expenditure, and 76% agreed that therapy and rehabilitation place a clear burden on the family budget. A similarly high proportion felt that these financial demands affected the family's ability to provide for other children. In 68% of responses, parents also indicated that a family member had to reduce or leave work in order to care for the child. The economic results therefore reinforce the idea that marriage-related worries do not occur in isolation; they are linked to the broader financial pressures faced by families.

Table (4): Economic impact of having a child with ASD

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	Statement
2 (4%)	4 (8%)	4 (8%)	18 (36%)	22 (44%)	Caring for a child with autism requires significant financial expenses.
2 (4%)	4 (8%)	6 (12%)	18 (36%)	20 (40%)	Therapy and rehabilitation burden the family budget.
2 (4%)	4 (8%)	6 (12%)	20 (40%)	18 (36%)	Having a child with autism reduces the ability to provide for other children.
2 (4%)	8 (16%)	6 (12%)	18 (36%)	16 (32%)	A family member has to quit or reduce working hours to care for the child.

Economic Impact Distribution



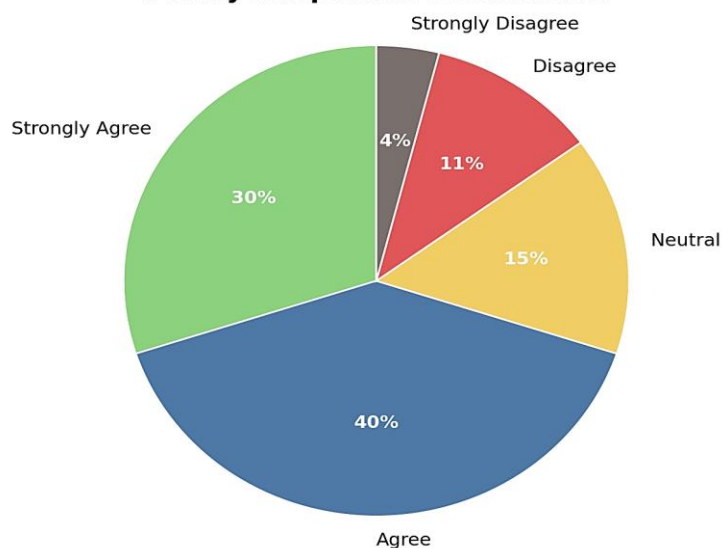
Family Adaptation and Coping:

Although the preceding results point to substantial burden, the family adaptation domain reveals an important counter-pattern: many families also reported resilience and internal cooperation. Seventy-six percent agreed that family members shared caregiving responsibilities, and an identical proportion agreed that the family had developed strategies to adapt to the child's condition. Support from relatives or the community was less robust, with 64% agreement, suggesting that internal family coping may be stronger than external social support. The same proportion agreed that having a child with autism had strengthened family ties. These findings indicate that burden and resilience coexist rather than exclude one another.

Table (5): Family adaptation to having a child with ASD

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree	Statement
2 (4%)	4 (8%)	6 (12%)	20 (40%)	18 (36%)	My family cooperates in sharing responsibilities for the autistic child.
2 (4%)	4 (8%)	6 (12%)	22 (44%)	16 (32%)	The family has developed strategies to adapt to the child's condition.
2 (4%)	8 (16%)	8 (16%)	18 (36%)	14 (28%)	I can receive support from relatives or the community when needed.
2 (4%)	6 (12%)	10 (20%)	20 (40%)	12 (24%)	Having a child with autism has strengthened family ties.

Family Adaptation Distribution



Integrated Interpretation of the Results

Taken together, the results suggest a pattern in which psychological burden, social stigma, and economic strain reinforce one another. Parents who feel emotionally exhausted and financially stretched are also likely to perceive a narrowing of social participation and a decline in the family's standing within the community. Within that broader pattern, siblings' marriage prospects emerge as a particularly salient concern.

The data also indicate that the perceived impact on marriage is not simply a reflection of the child's diagnosis itself. Rather, it appears to be mediated by social attitudes: gossip, misconceptions about heredity, restricted social acceptance, and the symbolic importance of family reputation in marriage decisions. The questionnaire results therefore support the interpretation that parental concern about marriage prospects is fundamentally social and cultural in nature.

Discussion

The findings of this study show that families in Ramallah who have a child with ASD experience a combination of emotional, social, and financial pressures that shape how they think about the future of all their children. The consistently high levels of agreement across the psychological and economic domains confirm that the impact of autism is experienced as a whole-family issue. This is consistent with previous work showing elevated stress, worry, and caregiver burden among parents of children with ASD (Begum & Mamin, 2019; He et al., 2022; Muhsen, 2024).

What distinguishes the present study is its focus on siblings' marriage prospects. The results suggest that parents see marriage not merely as a private matter but as an arena in which stigma becomes visible. When 68% of respondents agree that the presence of a child with autism negatively affects

the marriage opportunities of other children in the family, that response reflects more than personal anxiety. It indicates a perceived social mechanism through which autism-related stigma is transferred from the diagnosed child to the family as a whole.

In the Ramallah context, this transfer is understandable. Marriage decisions are often influenced by family background, kinship reputation, and community opinion. Under such conditions, disability may be interpreted through collective rather than individual terms. Families may fear that potential in-laws will associate autism with hereditary risk, hidden burden, or reputational weakness. These concerns have been discussed more broadly in the literature on disability stigma and family functioning, but they remain insufficiently documented in Palestinian settings (de Leeuw et al., 2020; Laghi et al., 2018).

The social findings also suggest that perceived marriage disadvantage is connected to reduced public participation. Families who struggle to attend social gatherings or who feel that society does not fully accept them may have fewer opportunities to sustain the social relationships through which many marriage arrangements or introductions take shape. In this sense, social isolation may indirectly affect marriage prospects by weakening the family's presence within community networks.

The economic results deepen this interpretation. Financial pressure does not only burden the household materially; it may also influence how the family imagines the future. Costs related to therapy, rehabilitation, transport, and reduced labour-market participation can create uncertainty about the family's long-term stability. In contexts where marriage is associated with economic readiness and social security, these pressures may become part of parents' concerns about siblings' futures.

At the same time, the family adaptation results complicate any purely deficit-based narrative. Many respondents described family cooperation, shared caregiving, and adaptive strategies. This suggests that families are not passive victims of stigma. Rather, they develop practical and emotional resources that help them cope with difficult circumstances. The coexistence of burden and resilience is an important finding. It indicates that support interventions should not only address distress but also build on existing family strengths.

The study also points toward likely gendered dynamics, even if the available descriptive data do not allow formal subgroup testing. The narrative responses and cultural logic surrounding marriage in Palestine suggest that daughters may be more vulnerable to family-level stigma in marriage negotiations. This interpretation is consistent with broader gender norms in which women's marriageability is often more closely tied to family reputation and perceived social risk. Future research should examine this issue directly with designs that allow subgroup comparison.

Overall, the results indicate that the effect of having a child with ASD on siblings' marriage prospects is better understood as a socially mediated outcome than as a direct consequence of autism itself. The main problem appears to be stigma, misunderstanding, and the social meaning assigned to disability within marriage-oriented community structures.

Implications

The findings have implications for policy, practice, and public awareness. First, autism awareness campaigns in Palestine should address not only the child's developmental needs but also the wider family consequences of stigma. Public education that corrects misconceptions about causation and heredity may help reduce family-level prejudice.

Second, psychosocial support for families should be broadened beyond immediate caregiving issues. Parents and siblings may benefit from counselling, peer support groups, and structured community support that addresses the emotional and social effects of stigma.

Third, community institutions, including schools, NGOs, health services, and religious or local leaders, can play a role in normalising neurodevelopmental difference and supporting inclusion. In tightly knit communities, endorsement from trusted institutions may be especially important in changing attitudes.

Fourth, families should not be approached only as units of burden. The results show significant adaptive capacity, and support programs should recognise and strengthen family resilience rather than treat families only through a deficit lens.

Limitations

This study has several limitations. First, the sample was modest and purposive, which limits the generalisability of the findings. Second, the data reflect parental perceptions rather than direct reports from siblings or from potential marriage partners and their families. The study therefore captures how parents understand the issue, not verified marriage outcomes.

Third, the analysis is primarily descriptive. Although this is useful for an exploratory study, it does not establish causal relationships or allow robust subgroup comparisons. Fourth, the questionnaire examined marriage-related concern within broader domains of family impact, which means that the central construct of marriage prospects was not isolated through a dedicated scale. Future research could strengthen the design by developing a more focused instrument and by including interviews with siblings themselves.

Recommendations

- Develop community awareness programmes in Ramallah that address stigma, myths about heredity, and misconceptions about autism.
- Expand psychosocial and counselling services for parents and siblings in families of children with ASD.
- Integrate disability awareness and neurodiversity education into schools and community institutions.

- Encourage local organisations, NGOs, and religious/community leaders to participate in anti-stigma initiatives.
- Provide financial and service-related support to families facing high therapy and caregiving costs.
- Undertake future research that includes siblings directly and examines gender, locality, and socioeconomic variation in greater depth.

Conclusion

This study examined parental perceptions of the impact of having a child with ASD on siblings' marriage prospects in Ramallah, Palestine. The findings show that this concern is embedded in a wider pattern of psychological distress, social stigma, and economic pressure experienced by families. At the same time, many families demonstrate substantial resilience and adaptive capacity.

The central conclusion is that the perceived disadvantage in marriage prospects is shaped primarily by community attitudes and stigma rather than by autism as a diagnosis in itself. This makes the issue a social and cultural one as much as a family one. Greater public understanding, better support structures, and stronger inclusion efforts are therefore essential if families are to live with dignity and without the additional burden of reputational fear.

By documenting these parental perceptions, the study contributes to a neglected area of autism research in Palestine and opens the way for more focused work on siblings, stigma, and family futures in Arab contexts.

Declarations

- Funding: This research was conducted without external financial support.
- Conflict of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.
- Ethics and Consent: Participation was voluntary, and responses were collected anonymously for academic research purposes.

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