

Gender Equality in ASDC: Unravelling Societal Challenge in Educational Attainment and Economic Empowerment, Inheritance Access, and Workplace Dynamics in Malaysia

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Abstract: This study investigates the nuanced intersectionality of gender equality within the context of Autism Spectrum Disorder Condition (ASDC) individuals. Contrary to Feminism, which advocates for gender equality and women's rights. While existing research has predominantly focused on the clinical aspects of ASDC, this study delves into the educational attainment and economic empowerment, inheritance access and workplace dynamics that impact individuals with ASDC, with a particular emphasis on gender-related disparities. The research encompasses ASDC in-depth analysis of access to resources, including property, inheritance, workplace, and sources of income, evaluating the extent to which individuals with ASDC, particularly women, face barriers in obtaining and managing. This study integrates a qualitative insight from ASDC, their families, teachers, and relevant stakeholders. 50 participants of ASDC individuals aged 14 to 57 years old contributed to the study and only 17 participants were selected for structural interview sessions. The study aims to contribute valuable perspectives to the existing literature on gender equality by unravelling the multifaceted challenges faced by women with ASDC in various societal domains. Finding underscore the critical need for targeted educational programs, innovative employment models, and curriculum adaptation within the Malaysian TVET program to enhance employability and independence for ASDC women. The study advocates for a comprehensive, multi-faceted approach to remove systemic barriers and promote gender equality, emphasizing the potential of women with ASDC as agents of change in their communities.

Keywords: Gender Equality, Autism Spectrum Disorder Condition (ASDC), Female Autism, Education, Economic Empowerment, Workplace Dynamics

1. The Intersection of Autism and Gender in Self-Definition

1.1 Autism: A Gendered Concept.

Gender inequality is a pervasive issue within the autism community, often overshadowed by the focus on the condition itself. However, current research has highlighted the unique challenges faced by individuals with autism spectrum disorder based on their gender identity (Sedgewick, 2020; Blair et al., 2020). This intersection of autism and gender has drawn increasing attention from clinicians, researchers, and advocates alike. The study shown that there are differences in the way ASDC presents in males and females, with females being underdiagnosed or receiving diagnoses later in life due to difference in the way they express their symptoms (Hume, K. et al., 2021; Lai et al., 2015). This underrepresentation has led to a lack of research on the unique challenge faced by individuals with ASDC who are female or non-binary. This is due to the misconception that autism predominantly affects males, leading to underdiagnosis and misdiagnosis in individuals whose gender does not align with this stereotype (Gesi et al., 2021). Consequently, there is a need to understand how societal expectations and norms around gender can impact the experiences of individuals with autism.

This study examines the additional difficulties experienced by women with ASDC due to societal expectations based on gender in Malaysia. These expectations affect how parents, educators, and professionals perceive and respond to their behaviours (Bargiela, 2015; Cheslack-Postava et al., 2014). The presence of gender-conforming hobbies among females with ASDC, such as a preference for reading, crafts, or animals, might make it more difficult to identify ASDC features, therefore making the diagnosis procedure more complex (Davidson & Tamas, 2016; Duvekot et al., 2017). The presence of misunderstandings and the internalization of symptoms highlight the significance of exploring how gender and ASDC intersect to shape self-identification and experiences of ASDC.

Recent statistical analysis of ASDC in Malaysian cases has shed light on the gendered nature of the condition (Eow, S.Y., 2020). The research findings indicate that there is a significant gender disparities ASDC diagnoses, with males being diagnosed at a much higher rate than females (Kaman et al., 2023). This pattern aligns with global trends, reflecting the underrepresentation of females in ASDC diagnoses. The underdiagnosis of females in Malaysia raises concerns about the potential lack of support and resources available to meet their specific needs.

Additionally, the societal expectations and norms around gender in Malaysia may influence the experiences of individuals with ASDC, particularly those who are female or non-binary (Yee et al., 2020; Asahar et al., 2021). These expectations can impact their access to resources, support, and inclusion in the community. As such, it is imperative to consider the intersection of gender and ASDC in the Malaysian context to provide tailored interventions and support services that address the unique challenges faced by them across diverse gender identities.

This study utilized a qualitative research approach, which was based on an epistemological basis that combines feminism, education, leadership, and workplace dynamics within an ASDC development paradigm in particularly women individuals. These important ways of thinking about knowledge are crucial for examining dominant cultural stories, with the goal of clarifying the intricate relationship between educational and leadership concepts and how they impact human experiences (Turi, M., 2015). This research aims to question traditional ASDC assumptions and give more attention to the perspectives of marginalized groups who are frequently ignored or not given enough importance in mainstream discussions. It adopts a feminist developmental strategy to achieve this goal (McPartland, 2011; Parr, J. R. 2011).

Addressing this notable gap, the current study presents the lived experiences of ten Malaysian females and seven males diagnosed with ASDC, delving into the intricate ways in which gendered expectations influence their experiences of ASDC, their self-perception, and overall well-being. The findings from this study illuminate that these women grappled with reconciling societal expectations, especially those related to femininity, from an early age. The challenge to adhere to stereotypical feminine ideals was a recurrent theme, indicating a profound discord between their inherent identities and the external societal norms (Cridland et al., 2014; Davidson et al., 2014).

As these females progressed into later stages of life, they reported a diminishing pressure to conform to these gendered expectations, instead embracing their unique individualities and behaviors. This evolution highlights a significant shift in their self-conception, moving away from societal conformity towards self-acceptance (Hull et al., 2017).

Understanding the statistical prevalence and gendered experiences of ASDC in the Malaysian population is essential for informing policies and practices that promote gender equality within the autism community. By recognizing the gender disparities and societal influences on the individuals with ASDC in Malaysia, we can work towards creating inclusive and supportive environments that cater to the diverse needs for this special populations.

1.2 Rationale

The aim of this research is to examine the contributions of women with ASDC to the social, educational, and workplace dynamics within their communities. This study seeks to understand the ways in which ASDC women engage with and influence their societies, particularly in the context of promoting gender equality and contributing to sustainable development in their country. The specific aims of the study are delineated as follows:

1. This study explores how women with ASDC strengthen interpersonal relationships, enhance education, empower economically, facilitate inheritance rights, and contribute to better workplace conditions in their communities. The research seeks to reveal how these women conserve and improve essential societal features, revealing their vital role in community development and social growth.
2. To examine the role of gender equality affects the ASDC community and evaluate its significance in reaching the country's goals for sustainable development.
3. This investigation aims to shed light on the unique positions and potential of ASDC women as agents of change in their communities, emphasizing their contributions towards creating more inclusive, equitable, and sustainable societies.

2. Method

2.1 Methodology

This study emphasizes the mixed-method approach to investigate the dynamic educational attainment, economic empowerment, inheritance access and workplace integration for ASDC. The mixed-mode method allows a comprehensive understanding of the complexities and nuances of the experiences of individuals with ASDC in various spheres of life.

To achieve the study aims, a qualitative semi-structured interview has been utilized to capture the live experiences. The study focuses on ASDC patients, families, educators, employers, and healthcare providers. Semi-structured interviews record ASDC people's personal experiences and issues with education, employment, inheritance, and social integration. Thematic evaluation can reveal narrative patterns and themes from these interviews. Additionally, quantitative measures of questionnaires assessment have been employed to gather numerical of demographic population, educational outcomes, economic empowerment, employment rates, and financial independence among individuals with ASDC. Quantitative data will be collected through surveys and standardized assessments to gather numerical information on educational attainment, employment status, income levels, and access to inheritance for individuals with ASDC. A comparative analysis of the quantitative data of ASDC and neurotypical individuals has been conducted to identify disparities and trends.

2.2 Methods

The eligibility criteria for participant selection in this study were that individuals be male and female, with minimum of seven (7) years of age or older, residing in Malaysia, diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder (ASDC), and self-identifying as 'high functioning'. Although the term 'high functioning' is a subject of dispute within the ASDC community since it has the potential to oversimplify and misinterpret the complex experiences of individuals with ASDC, it was used in this study as a commonly accepted, if informal, descriptor (Linton et al., 2014). Participants were invited to express their viewpoints and describe their personal experiences with this label, thereby shedding light on the inherent intricacies and difficulties connected with it.

To enhance engagement, a dedicated online group discussion was established, serving as conduits for disseminating study-related information and fostering a beneficial connection between participants, teachers, families, and the researcher. Participants were given the freedom to select a suitable place and arrangement for the interviews. Significantly, there were small rewards provided to encourage participation, guaranteeing that involvement was optional and driven by a sincere desire to contribute to the research.



Figure 1: Teacher-Researcher-Participants discussion session upon conducting the data collection.

2.3 Participants

The population's demographic characteristics are presented in Table 1. The participants involved in this study voluntarily disclosed that they had been officially diagnosed with ASDC. The contributed participants' ages ranged from 9 to 40 years, with an average age of 47.4 years and a standard deviation of 5.3 years. All subjects, except for one, reported being diagnosed during the past five years. It is essential to emphasize that the study did not independently validate the official diagnosis, nor did it give a self-report screening instrument to confirm ASDC diagnoses. To ensure confidentiality and preserve the anonymity of participants, pseudonyms were employed throughout the analysis phase.

Table 1: Participant Demographics

Participants (coded)	Age	Gender ^a	Diagnosed ASD severity ^b	Co-occurrence condition	Marital status	Highest Education Level	Current Employment	
RA	14	F	SL 2		Single	Not Schooling	No	
QA	19	F	SL 1		Single	Secondary	Yes	
HA	15	F	SL 1		Single	Not Schooling	No	
CR	9	F	SL 1		Single	Primary	No	
FI	21	F	SL 1	Not Reported	Single	Secondary	Yes	
ZU	32	F	SL 1	post-natal depression, anxiety	Married with two children	Not Schooling	Yes	
MA	24	F	SL 2		Married with no children	Not Schooling	Yes	
JE	17	F	SL 1		Single	Secondary	No	
LA	40	F	SL 2	Asperger's	Single, divorced with no children	Not Schooling	Yes	
AS	16	F	SL 3	Anxiety, depression, eating disorder, social anxiety, obsessive-compulsive disorder, attention-deficit hyperactive disorder	Single	Not Schooling	No	
IK	21	M	SL 2		Single	Secondary	Yes	
MU	29	M	SL 2	LD, Anxiety	Social	Single	Not Schooling	Yes
IF	25	M	SL 2	LD, Anxiety, Obsessive-Compulsive	Social	Single	Not Schooling	Yes
FA	20	M	SL 2	Anxiety	Social	Single	Secondary	Yes
IQ	18	M	SL 1	ADHD, LD	Single	Secondary	Yes	
IZ	18	M	SL 1	ADHD, LD	Single	Secondary	Yes	
KH	27	M	SL 1	LD	Single	Primary	Yes	

^a M = male; F = female.

^b SL = Support Level; SL 0= None; SL 1= Mild/Requiring support; SL 2= Moderate/Requiring Substantial support; SL 3= Severe/Requiring Very Substantial support

3. Findings and Discussion

3.1 Theme 1: Educational Attainment and Economic Empowerment: Addressing Societal Challenges for Women with ASDC

Gender biases and stereotypes significantly affect the self-efficacy and aspirations of women diagnosed with ASDC, shaping their educational pursuits and access to economic opportunities (Giarelli et al., 2010). This theme offers a nuanced exploration of how gender biases and societal stereotypes impact individuals differently, based on gender. Drawing upon the lived experiences and testimonies of participants in this study, we observe a complex interplay between gender norms and the challenge faced by ASDC, particularly women, in accessing education and economic empowerment.

"School seemed fun for my friend, and I really wanted to join in on the sports, but I couldn't. I always say it's important for women here to get an education because it makes finding a job so much easier."..... (HA)

"School is fun, I join the sports, but I didn't enjoy it. The laugh at me when I fall to ground" (IK)

"I can read Malay Language, though my teacher thinks my writing needs work. At school, I was bullied and felt left out by friends from other communities, and even in the city, people stared at me strangely."..... (CR)

The statements from participants highlight a poignant disparity in educational experiences between genders, exacerbated by societal biases towards individuals with ASDC. For instance, HA expresses the desire to partake in educational and extracurricular activities but feels restricted by societal expectations and her ASDC. Similarly, CR's statement sheds light on the bullying and isolation experiences by woman with ASDC, not only from their peers but also from broader societal interactions, underscoring the additional barriers they face in educational environments.

Those experiences, however, contrast with the male participant, IK, who, despite facing all challenges such as bullying, still finds school enjoyable and participate in sports. The discrepancy may reflect a broader societal tolerance for neurodivergent behaviours in men than women, where stereotypes and expectations of conforming to normative behaviours can be more stringent for women (Giarelli et al., 2010).

"I don't go to school, my mom buy all my needs"HA

"I got no money; I don't know what to purchase for myself"CR

"I go shopping with my mon. I choose myself what to buy" IK

Economic empowerment narratives further elucidate gender disparities. HA's reliance on her mother for financial support highlights a dependency that may stem from limited access to education and economic opportunities. CR's statement about not having money or understanding how to manage purchases reflects a lack of empowerment and independence, issues that are often magnified for women with ASDC due societal prejudices and lack of supportive structures.

Conversely, IK's experience of shopping independently suggests a greater level of autonomy and economic empowerment. This could be attributed to gendered expectations that encourage independence in men, potentially affording them more opportunities to develop autonomy and financial literacy from young age.

3.2 Theme 2: Gender Disparities: Advocating for Equitable Inheritance Rights and Challenges on ASDC Equality

Central to this investigation is the exploration of how educational attainment among individuals with ASDC influences their access to essential resources such as property, inheritance rights, and financial services. This inquiry is particularly pertinent in understanding the systemic obstacles that obstruct women with ASDC from securing and managing these crucial assets, shedding light on the wider socio-economic impediments faced by this demographic. The assessment of the statement from ASDC regarding their understanding and perceptions of property rights and inheritance illuminates the complex interplay between gender, ASDC, and socio-legal awareness. This comparative analysis reveals distinct nuances in the experiences and understanding, suggesting that both gender and ASDC significantly shape their own perspectives on economic empowerment and legal awareness.

"I understand my rights completely, even with my ASD diagnosis, and I know they're the same as anyone else's, men included." (LA)

“I don’t know that my parent’s house can be my house if she’s gone “ (QA)

"I work hard so I can buy my own house, and just like my brothers and sisters, I should be able to inherit what my parents leave behind, but I don’t know how." (IF)

My parents’ house. No, I don’t know whether I can still stay in the house if they are no longer here, I don’t know how to live without them.” (MU)

LA’s assertion exemplifies the aspirations and challenges faced by women with ASDC. Her statement reflects a strong sense of right awareness and self-advocacy. This declaration not only indicates a high level of self confidence in her legal understanding but also recognition of gender equality in legal rights. This awareness is pivotal for empowerment and advocacy among women with ASDC, as highlighted by (Kinnear, et al., 2016), who emphasize the importance of legal literacy for individuals with disabilities in asserting their rights.

In contrast, QA’s expression of uncertainty concern underscores a gap in knowledge about inheritance laws that could significantly impact her future security and independence. This reflects findings by (SL Odom et al., 2014), who suggests that individuals with disabilities often face challenges in accessing information that is critical for their legal and economic empowerment, particularly in the context of inheritance.

IF’ statements mirror the confusion evident in QA’s sentiment but introduces a proactive approach towards economic independence. This reflects the gendered expectation of self-reliance traditionally associated with men but also reveals a lack of specific knowledge about inheritance process, a concern echoed in the literature on disability and socioeconomic inclusion (Wehmeyer et al., 2017).

MU’s concern points to an underlying anxiety about the future that extends beyond the legal realm into emotional dependence and stability. This highlights the intersection of socio-emotional support needs and legal awareness of ASDC, as discussed by (Blackhurst, et al., 2022), emphasizing the importance of holistic support systems.

The comparison reveals that while both genders express concerns about their understanding of property rights and inheritance, there is a notable difference in their responses. Women’s statement suggests a keen awareness of gender equality in rights but reveals gaps in specific knowledge about inheritance. In contrast, men’s statements reflect a traditional emphasis on self-reliance on economic independence but similarly display a lack of detailed understanding of inheritance laws. The findings underscore the necessity for tailored educational and support services that address both gender-specific challenges and their unique needs. Enhancing legal literacy among ASDC, particularly regarding property and inheritance, is critical for fostering independence and security.

3.3 Theme 3: Social Psychology and Workplace Dynamics for ASDC Inclusion

In Malaysia, individuals diagnosed with ASDC face significant barriers to entering and retaining employment, leading to high rates of unemployment and underemployment (Rai, D. et al., 2014; Howlin et al., 2004; Roux et al., 2013; Shattuck et al., 2012; Taylor et al., 2015). The economic and societal benefits of increasing workforce participation among this group, as well as among people with other disabilities, are substantial, indicating a potential for broad societal improvements (Buescher et al., 2014; Fleury et al., 2009; Knapp et al., 2009). Additionally, employment plays a crucial role in enhancing the physical and psychological well-being of individuals with ASDC (Chen et al., 2015; Creed and Macintyre, 2001; Feather and O’Brien, 1986).

Table 2: Participants’ Jobs and Individual Attribute

Job Classification ^a	Participants (coded)	Gender ^b	Age	Previous Work Experiences ^c	Co-occurrence condition
Office and administrative support	JE	F	17	1	
	QA	F	19	2	LD
	FI	F	21	2	
	LA	F	40	20	LD, Asperger's
Sales and related	MA	F	24	2	
	IK	M	21	1	
Education, training, and library					
Arts, design, entertainment, sports,					

Job Classification ^a	Participants (coded)	Gender ^b	Age	Previous Work Experiences ^c	Co-occurrence condition
and media					
Helpers–production workers	MU	M	29	3	LD
	IF	M	25	2	LD, Anxiety, Social Anxiety, Obsessive-Compulsive
	FA	M	20	3	Anxiety, social anxiety
	IQ	M	18	1	ADHD, LD
	IZ	M	18	1	ADHD, LD
Computer and mathematical					
Agricultural, Fishery and Plantation	KH	M	27	5	LD

^a Classified according to O*NET Online (2019) “job family”, Scott et.al (2019).

^b M = male; F = female.

^c Number of former workplaces; ADHD = attention deficit hyperactive disorder; LD = learning disabilities.

The evaluation of statements provided by individuals with ASDC offers valuable insight into nuanced experiences of employment and entrepreneurship within this community, particularly in relation to social psychology and workplace dynamics. This study analysis focuses on comparing the perspective of male and female participants to understand better the intersectionality of gender, ASDC, and national vocational aspiration.

"In our place, men and women share the same beliefs and follow the same traditions. Taking care of kids is everyone's job, not just the men, and I can say and do whatever I want." ... LA

"My dad said growing trees can bring in some extra money. I work and even started my own business to make my own cash, just like my friend who makes money by selling chickens." (MU)

Entrepreneurial pursuits and social integration-MU’s statement highlights the role of entrepreneurship as a pathway to economic self-sufficiency and autonomy. This entrepreneurial spirit is emblematic of the search for meaningful and fulfilling vocational opportunities that accommodate their needs and preferences, as discussed by (Hillier, A., et al., 2007), who underscore the importance of self-employment for individuals with ASD as means to circumvent traditional employment barriers.

KH’s experience of working within his community underscores the significance of social support and understanding in the workplace. His statement reflects the benefits of inclusive workplaces that attend to the diverse needs of employees, as highlighted by (Lorenz, T., et al, 2016), emphasizing the role of support networks in enhancing employment outcome for ASDC.

“I can’t work with people who look me as a stranger, but I can work on my own small business.” ... MA

“I’ve work with normal people but it’s better for me to work with my own community, we can share everything to each other. The teacher helps me a lot to do the work task.” (KH)

MA’s declare her preference for entrepreneurship as a means to circumvent social exclusion in the workplace echoes the sentiments expressed by MU, suggesting a gender-neutral trend among ASDC towards seeking autonomy and understanding through self-employment.

Both male and female participants underscore a common inclination towards entrepreneurship as a strategy, for achieving vocational success and economic independence, reflecting a broader trend within the ASDC community. This suggests that the challenge associated with traditional employment-such as social exclusion, misunderstanding, and the need for adaptive work environments-transcend gender differences.

However, the emphasis on community support and understanding as critical factors in workplace success points to the importance of social integration and acceptance in enhancing vocational outcomes for individuals with ASDC. This is particularly evidence in KH’s statements, which highlight the benefits of working within their own supportive community context.

The findings suggest the need for more inclusive and flexible opportunities that can accommodate the unique needs and preferences of ASDC, regardless of gender. Enhancing workplace inclusion and support mechanism can significantly impact the vocational trajectories of men and women with ASDC, as evidenced by the positive

outcomes associated with entrepreneurship and community-based employment.

4. Conclusion

The study underscores the urgency of addressing the systemic barriers that disproportionately affect women with ASDC, from educational access and economic empowerment to inheritance rights and workplace inclusion. As we move forward, a comprehensive, multi-faceted approach is essential. This shall include:

- Developing inclusive education program specifically address the need and aspirations of women with ASDC, focusing on empowering them to understand and assert their inheritance and property rights.
- Promoting entrepreneurship and innovative employment models that accommodate the unique talents and needs of women with ASDC, while fostering supportive community and workplace environments.
- The Malaysian TVET program, focusing on practical skills, is well positioned to support individuals with ASDC, particularly women, by offering vocational training tailored to their unique needs. This alignment enhances their employability and economic independence. For optimal impact, the program must adapt its curriculum and support services to the learning styles and social challenges specific to women with ASDC. Such adaptations could significantly contribute to breaking employment barriers, promoting gender equality, and fostering sustainable development in Malaysia by empowering this underrepresented group to achieve vocational success and social inclusion.

Ultimately, the empowerment of women with ASDC hinges on our collective commitment to creating a society that value and uplifts all its members, recognizing the immense potential within everyone, irrespective of their neurodivergence. By embracing these recommendations, we can pave the way for a future where woman with ASDC not only thrive but lead in preservation and development of their communities.

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Declarations

Research involving human participants *Yes*

Informed consent *Yes*

Conflict of interest *On behalf of all authors, the corresponding author states that there is no conflict of interest.*

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