



Original Article

Enhancing Awareness and Understanding of Autism Spectrum Disorder in Minchinabad: A Participatory Action Research Approach

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Abstract

This study investigates the effectiveness of interventions aimed at enhancing awareness of Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) in Minchinabad through a participatory action research approach. A total of 100 participants were included in this research. They were Community Leaders, Healthcare Professionals, Religious Leaders, and Educators picked through Convenience Sampling. Initial data collection reveals prevalent misconceptions and barriers surrounding ASD awareness. Among them, 89% of respondents expressed a lack of sufficient awareness and 85% attributed ASD to divine factors. Subsequently, community-led workshops, social media campaigns, and Religious institutions-based awareness activities were implemented to address these challenges. Evaluation indicates a significant improvement in awareness levels. Improvement with 53% acknowledging adequate awareness. However, more than 40% still perceive a stigma associated with seeking an ASD diagnosis. While cultural beliefs persist, such as 60% to 68% believing in the divine causation of ASD. The interventions have contributed to a positive shift in community perceptions. The findings underscore the importance of sustained efforts to promote understanding and acceptance of ASD within the community, emphasizing the need for continued engagement and advocacy for ASD Awareness.

Keywords: Autism spectrum disorder, Barriers and facilitators, Community engagement, Cultural sensitivity, Public health communication, Religious beliefs

INTRODUCTION

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a complex neurodevelopmental condition characterized by challenges in social interaction, communication, and restricted or repetitive behaviors ([American Psychiatric Association, 2013](#)). Globally, the prevalence of ASD has been increasing, with an estimated 1 in 160 children affected ([Eqani, et al., 2020](#)). The intricate interplay between genetic and environmental factors contributes to the heterogeneity of ASD ([Cheroni, et al., 2020](#)), necessitating a nuanced approach to understanding and addressing it, particularly in diverse sociocultural contexts ([Chen, et al., 2014](#)). Despite global advancements in the awareness and understanding of ASD, many rural communities, such as Minchinabad in Punjab, Pakistan, continue to face significant challenges. These challenges include misconceptions about ASD, cultural and religious beliefs attributing the condition to divine factors, and a pervasive stigma associated with seeking a diagnosis. Such barriers often result in delayed diagnoses, limited access to appropriate healthcare services, and inadequate support for individuals with ASD and their families ([Dillenburger, et al., 2013](#)).

Minchinabad, a vibrant rural community situated in the heart of Punjab, is characterized by its rich cultural heritage and close-knit social fabric. The community primarily engages in agriculture, with recent diversification into education, healthcare, and government services. Despite these advancements, Minchinabad faces socio-economic challenges, including limited access to healthcare and educational resources. Within this context, ASD awareness and understanding present significant concerns, influenced by deep-seated cultural and religious beliefs. The existing literature highlights the lack of awareness and misconceptions about ASD in similar settings. Studies from neighboring regions in Pakistan indicate that these challenges lead to delayed diagnosis and inadequate support for affected individuals ([Iqbal, et al., 2023](#)). Factors such as stigma, socioeconomic status, and limited access to healthcare services further exacerbate the situation ([de Leeuw, et al., 2020](#); [Harman, 2014](#)).

Given the limited research specifically focusing on ASD awareness in Minchinabad, this study aims to bridge the knowledge gap by exploring the prevailing perceptions and beliefs about ASD within the community. By employing a participatory action research approach, this study engages community leaders, healthcare professionals, religious leaders, and educators in co-designing and implementing awareness initiatives. This collaborative approach ensures cultural sensitivity, relevance, and sustainability of the interventions. The study's objectives are to assess the current level of ASD awareness in Minchinabad, identify prevalent misconceptions and barriers, and evaluate the effectiveness of community-led workshops, social media campaigns, and religious setting-based awareness activities in enhancing ASD

awareness. The findings from this research will provide insights into the specific needs and challenges faced by the community, informing future interventions and policy recommendations.

Addressing the lack of ASD awareness in Minchinabad is crucial for fostering a supportive environment for individuals with ASD and their families. This study underscores the importance of sustained community engagement, culturally sensitive education, and policy advocacy in promoting early detection, acceptance, and support for individuals with ASD. By leveraging the community's resilience and commitment to collective well-being, this research aims to contribute to a more inclusive and informed community in Minchinabad.

Statement of the Problem

Despite growing global awareness of ASD, many rural communities, such as Minchinabad in Punjab, Pakistan, continue to face significant challenges in understanding and managing the condition. Cultural and religious beliefs often shape perceptions of health and disability, leading to misconceptions and stigmatization of ASD. This results in delayed diagnoses, limited access to appropriate healthcare services, and inadequate support for affected individuals and their families. The problem is compounded by a lack of comprehensive educational initiatives and policy support aimed at bridging the knowledge gap. Addressing these challenges is crucial to improving ASD awareness and fostering a supportive environment in Minchinabad.

Research Objectives

The specific objectives are as follows:

Assess Baseline Knowledge

- To evaluate the current level of knowledge and awareness about ASD among the residents of Minchinabad.
- To identify prevalent misconceptions and cultural or religious beliefs related to ASD in the community.

Develop and Implement a Culturally Sensitive Campaign

- To design a social media awareness campaign that is tailored to the cultural and religious context of Minchinabad.
- To collaborate with local community leaders, religious figures, and healthcare professionals to ensure the campaign's content is relevant and credible.

Evaluate the Campaign's Effectiveness

- To measure the change in awareness and understanding of ASD among the residents of Minchinabad before and after the campaign.
- To assess the impact of the campaign on attitudes towards individuals with ASD and their families.
- To analyze the reach and engagement of the social media campaign within the target community.

Identify Barriers and Facilitators

- To identify barriers to effective communication and engagement in raising ASD awareness in Minchinabad.
- To explore factors that facilitate increased awareness and understanding of ASD in the community.

Provide Recommendations for Future Campaigns

- To develop recommendations for future awareness campaigns on ASD in similar cultural and religious contexts.
- To suggest strategies for sustaining and expanding the impact of the awareness campaign beyond the initial implementation period.

By achieving these objectives, the study aims to contribute to the broader goal of improving the lives of individuals with ASD and their families in Minchinabad through increased awareness and understanding of the disorder.

Research Questions

1. *What are the prevailing perceptions and beliefs about ASD within the Minchinabad community?*

- How do cultural and religious factors influence these perceptions?
- What misconceptions about ASD are most common in the community?

2. *How effective are community-led workshops, social media campaigns, and religious setting-based awareness activities in enhancing ASD awareness in Minchinabad?*

- What changes in awareness and attitudes are observed post-intervention?
- Which intervention strategies are perceived as most impactful by community members?

3. *What barriers exist in seeking and accessing diagnosis and treatment for ASD in Minchinabad?*

- How significant is the stigma associated with ASD within the community?
- What role do healthcare professionals, educators, and community leaders play in facilitating or hindering access to ASD services?

4. *What are the perceptions of community members regarding government initiatives and policy interventions aimed at enhancing ASD awareness and support?*

- How can policy changes improve access to diagnostic and intervention services for ASD?
- What are the community's recommendations for future initiatives to sustain and build upon the progress made?

Hypothesis

H₁: Community-led workshops significantly improve the awareness and understanding of ASD among residents of Minchinabad.

H₂: Misconceptions and stigmas related to ASD are prevalent in Minchinabad, hindering early diagnosis and support for individuals with ASD.

H₃: Religious and cultural beliefs in Minchinabad significantly influence perceptions and attitudes towards ASD, affecting the willingness to seek diagnosis and intervention.

H₄: Social media campaigns tailored to the cultural context of Minchinabad are effective in disseminating information and increasing ASD awareness.

H₅: Integrating ASD awareness activities within religious settings significantly enhances community acceptance and support for individuals with ASD.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The awareness and understanding of ASD remain limited in many parts of the world, particularly in regions with strong cultural and religious influences. ASD is a developmental disorder characterized by difficulties in social interaction, communication, and repetitive behaviors. It is widely recognized in developed countries, where early diagnosis and intervention are prioritized. However, in many developing regions, awareness and understanding of ASD are often hindered by cultural misconceptions and stigmas. Research indicates that awareness of ASD varies significantly across different countries and cultures. In developed countries, extensive efforts have been made to educate the public about ASD, leading to increased recognition and support for individuals with the condition (Elsabbagh, et al., 2012). For instance, campaigns and initiatives by organizations such as Autism Speaks have played a pivotal role in raising awareness and advocating for the needs of individuals with ASD.

Cultural beliefs and practices significantly influence perceptions of ASD. In many cultures, developmental disorders like ASD are misunderstood, often attributed to supernatural causes or considered a result of parental negligence (Daley, 2004). These misconceptions can lead to stigmatization of affected individuals and their families, delaying diagnosis and intervention. Studies have shown that cultural competency is crucial in designing effective awareness campaigns and interventions (Mandell & Novak, 2005). Religion can play a dual role in the context of ASD awareness. On one hand, religious institutions can provide a supportive community for individuals with ASD and their families. On the other hand, certain religious beliefs may contribute to the stigmatization of ASD. For example, in some communities, ASD is seen as a test of faith or a consequence of sin (Rahman, et al., 2016). Engaging religious leaders in awareness campaigns is effective in changing community attitudes toward ASD (Dyches, et al., 2004).

In recent years, social media has emerged as a powerful tool for raising awareness about various health conditions, including ASD. Social media platforms offer a cost-effective means of disseminating information quickly and widely. Tailoring social media campaigns to fit the cultural context of a target audience can significantly enhance their effectiveness. Studies have demonstrated that social media campaigns can lead to increased knowledge and more positive attitudes towards ASD (Huang, et al., 2019). In Pakistan, awareness of ASD remains low, particularly in rural areas. Cultural and religious beliefs heavily influence perceptions of developmental disorders, often resulting in delayed diagnosis and limited access to intervention services. Efforts to raise awareness about ASD in Pakistan have been limited, with few targeted campaigns addressing the unique cultural and religious context of the region.

Overall, the literature highlights the importance of culturally sensitive approaches to raising ASD awareness. Effective strategies include engaging community leaders, leveraging social media, and integrating awareness activities within religious settings. In regions like Minchinabad, where cultural and religious beliefs strongly influence health behaviors, these strategies can play a critical role in improving understanding and support for individuals with ASD.

Theoretical Framework

In an endeavor to enhance awareness and understanding of ASD in Minchinabad, the research proposes a comprehensive theoretical framework. The theoretical framework integrates key concepts from Social Cognitive Theory (SCT), Community-Based Participatory Research (CBPR), the Health Belief Model (HBM), Empowerment Theory, and the Cultural Competence Framework. According to Ilmiani, et al., (2021), Albert Bandura's SCT emphasizes the role of observational learning, social interaction, and cultural influences in shaping individuals' perceptions and behaviors (Matei, 2006). Applied to ASD awareness in Minchinabad, SCT underscores the importance of community engagement and collaboration in disseminating accurate information. It challenges misconceptions and promotes positive attitudes toward ASD. CBPR emphasizes the collaborative involvement of community members, researchers, and stakeholders in all stages of the research process (Collins, et al., 2018).

In the context of ASD awareness, CBPR highlights the significance of engaging diverse stakeholders in co-designing and implementing awareness initiatives. It ensures cultural sensitivity, relevance, and sustainability. HBM suggests that individuals' health-related behaviors are influenced by their perceptions of the severity of a health condition, susceptibility to it, benefits of taking action, and barriers to behavior change (Anuar, et al., 2020). Applied to ASD awareness, HBM underscores the need to address perceived barriers. The barriers such as stigma and misconceptions. It emphasizes the benefits of early detection, intervention, and support for individuals with ASD and their families (Agbate, 2023). Empowerment theory emphasizes promoting individuals' agency, self-efficacy, and participation in decision-making processes to facilitate positive social change (Zimmerman, 2000).

In the context of ASD awareness, empowerment theory highlights the value of engaging community members as active participants in the research process. It also highlights fostering ownership, advocacy, and solidarity within the community. The Cultural Competence Framework recognizes the influence of cultural beliefs, values, and practices on health-related perceptions and behaviours (Balcazar, et al., 2009). In the context of ASD awareness, cultural competence emphasizes the importance of understanding and

respecting diverse cultural perspectives on disability, health, and help-seeking behaviours. It ensures that interventions are respectful, inclusive, and effective in reaching diverse populations within the community. By integrating these theoretical perspectives, The proposed framework for enhancing ASD awareness in Minchinabad aims to empower the community, challenge misconceptions, and promote positive attitudes and behaviours towards individuals with ASD, ultimately fostering a more inclusive and supportive environment for all community members.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The research design for this study on enhancing awareness of ASD in Minchinabad involves a mixed-methods approach, incorporating both quantitative and qualitative methodologies. This design allows for a comprehensive understanding of the community's perceptions, beliefs, and the effectiveness of the intervention strategies. The research design comprises the following components:

Study Setting

Minchinabad is a vibrant rural community Situated in the heart of Punjab, Pakistan. It is characterized by its rich cultural heritage and close-knit social fabric. Minchinabad is a diverse population engaged primarily in agriculture. According to the Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, the population of Minchinabad was approximately 526,228 in 2017. Farming serves as the backbone of the local economy. Small-scale businesses and skilled artisans contribute to the town's economic landscape. Recent years have seen a gradual diversification of occupations, with opportunities emerging in education, healthcare, and government services. Despite its picturesque landscapes and bustling markets, Minchinabad faces various socio-economic challenges. The challenges include limited access to healthcare and educational resources. Within this context, the awareness and understanding of ASD present significant concerns.

Historically, cultural and religious beliefs have played a profound role in shaping perceptions of health and disability in Minchinabad. Misconceptions surrounding ASD, often attributed to divine factors, have persisted, hindering early diagnosis and intervention efforts. The stigma surrounding seeking a diagnosis further exacerbates the challenges faced by individuals and families affected by ASD. However, amidst these challenges, Minchinabad boasts a resilient community spirit and a commitment to collective well-being. Community leaders, healthcare professionals, educators, and religious figures play pivotal roles in shaping community attitudes and behaviours. Their influence extends across various spheres of daily life. Which makes them essential partners in efforts to enhance ASD awareness and acceptance.

Population & Sampling

The target population includes residents of Minchinabad, with a focus on parents, teachers, healthcare professionals, religious leaders, and general community members. The sampling approach for the study on enhancing ASD awareness in Minchinabad was conducted using convenience sampling. It was due to ensure representation from diverse demographic groups relevant to the research objectives. The sampling frame encompassed individuals residing in Minchinabad. It included parents, teachers, healthcare professionals, religious leaders, and community members. The targeted sample size of 100 participants was deemed adequate to capture a comprehensive range of perspectives while maintaining feasibility and resource constraints.

Participants were selected based on specific criteria:

Parents: Individuals with children diagnosed with ASD or those interested in ASD awareness.

Teachers: Educators working in schools or educational institutions in Minchinabad.

Healthcare Professionals: Medical professionals, therapists, or counsellors involved in ASD diagnosis or treatment.

Religious Leaders: Clergy members or spiritual leaders influential within the community.

Community Members: Residents representing various socio-economic backgrounds and age groups.

Recruitment was conducted through diverse channels. It included community centres, educational institutions, healthcare facilities, religious congregations, and local organizations.

Tool Development

Through collaborative efforts with stakeholders, culturally sensitive questionnaires were designed to capture diverse perspectives on ASD awareness in Minchinabad. Rigorous pilot testing and feedback loops ensured the validity and reliability of the instruments, enabling a comprehensive understanding of the community's perceptions and beliefs surrounding ASD. Sampling continued until data saturation was achieved. It was to ensure the richness and depth of the data collected. Overall, the sampling methodology facilitated the gathering of diverse insights and experiences relevant to ASD awareness in Minchinabad. It contributes to a comprehensive understanding of the challenges and opportunities within the community.

Data Collection Procedures

- Pre-Intervention Survey: A structured questionnaire was administered to assess baseline knowledge, attitudes, and beliefs about ASD.
- Post-Intervention Survey: A follow-up survey was conducted to measure changes in awareness, perceptions, and attitudes after the interventions.

A comprehensive survey instrument was meticulously crafted to gauge the community's awareness and perceptions regarding ASD. Drawing from existing literature and consultation with experts, the tool encompassed questions covering various aspects of ASD awareness, beliefs, and attitudes. Careful consideration was given to ensure the clarity, relevance, and cultural sensitivity of the survey items. Piloting and refinement of the instrument were conducted to enhance its reliability and validity before deployment in the field.

Data Analysis

The data analysis for this study involves a comprehensive examination of the survey responses collected before and after the implementation of the awareness campaign. Initially, all survey responses were accurately entered into a statistical software program SPSS, followed by data cleaning to address any inconsistencies, missing values, or outliers. Descriptive statistics was used to summarize the baseline and post-intervention data for each survey question. Frequency distributions and percentages were generated for categorical variables, providing a clear visualization of the data through tables.

Ethical Considerations

Before participation, informed consent was obtained from all participants. Which emphasized voluntary participation, confidentiality, and the right to withdraw from the study at any time without consequences. Special attention was given to ensuring diversity and representation within the sample. It was done by including individuals from different genders, ages, educational backgrounds, and socio-economic statuses. Efforts were made to include marginalized or underrepresented groups. It was to capture a comprehensive range of perspectives.

Initial Data Analysis

Table 1

Initial Perceptions and Beliefs of the People about ASD in Minchinabad

Descriptions	SD (%)	D(%)	N(%)	A(%)	SA(%)
Sufficient awareness about ASD within the community	28	61	6	4	1
ASD is a curse	1	7	7	49	36
ASD is a Disease	2	9	6	52	31
ASD can be cured by medicine	1	6	7	48	38
ASD can be cured by religious and spiritual treatments (murshad's duaand taking them to Tombs of Aulia)	1	7	7	49	36
Stigma associated with seeking a diagnosis for ASD	1	7	8	45	39
Adequate Information about the signs and Symptoms of ASD	33	59	4	3	1
Community-led awareness programs on ASD are organized	28	61	6	4	1
Community-led awareness programs could positively impact the rate of ASD diagnosis	1	7	7	49	36
Government initiatives can play a significant role in enhancing ASD awareness and diagnosis in Minchinabad	1	6	7	49	37

Strongly Disagree (SD), Disagree (D), Neutral (N), Agree (A), Strongly Agree (SA)

The table 1 provides detailed insights into the perceptions and beliefs surrounding ASD awareness in Minchinabad. It indicates a concerning discrepancy between perceived awareness levels and the actual state of ASD understanding within the community. A majority of respondents (61%) disagree or strongly disagree that there is sufficient awareness about ASD. This suggests a pressing need for educational initiatives to bridge this gap. The table highlights prevalent cultural beliefs regarding the aetiology and treatment of ASD. A substantial proportion of respondents (49%) agree or strongly agree that ASD is believed to be caused by divine factors. The factors such as the curse of Allah Almighty. They think it can be cured through religious practices like "MURSHAD'S DUA" and visiting "TOMBS of AULIA." There is an acknowledgment (52%) that ASD is perceived as a disease. It indicates a dualistic understanding of the condition. Despite this, nearly half of the respondents (48%) agree or strongly agree that ASD can be medically treated. It underlines a potential dissonance between cultural beliefs and biomedical approaches to ASD management.

However, the presence of stigma associated with seeking a diagnosis (45%) suggests societal barriers hindering access to appropriate healthcare services. On a positive note, the acknowledgment of community-led awareness programs (61%) and the perceived positive impact of such initiatives on diagnosis rates (49%) signify potential avenues for improving ASD awareness and access to services in Minchinabad. Additionally, recognizing the role of government initiatives in enhancing ASD awareness and diagnosis (49%) underscores the importance of policy interventions in addressing community needs. In sum, the frequency table elucidates the multifaceted nature of ASD awareness in Minchinabad. It emphasizes the importance of culturally sensitive and holistic approaches to promoting understanding and support for individuals with ASD within the community.

Intervention Planning and Implementation

It involved community-led workshops, information on social media platforms, and awareness campaigns. Community-led workshops are organized in collaboration with leaders, professionals, and spiritual guides. ASD information was disseminated through social media platforms, ensuring broad outreach and ongoing engagement. Awareness campaigns before and after Juma prayers in religious settings further amplified the message. Community leaders, professionals, and spiritual leaders collaborated to organize interactive workshops aimed at raising awareness about ASD within the Minchinabad community. These workshops were conducted at community centres and other accessible venues. These workshops provided a platform for open dialogue, information sharing, and dispelling

myths about ASD. Utilizing the widespread use of digital platforms in Minchinabad, information about ASD awareness was spread through WhatsApp groups and Facebook pages. The Researcher, Community leaders, and professionals created dedicated groups and pages. Educational materials, resources, and updates are shared about ASD through these channels. This approach ensures that information reaches a wider audience and facilitates ongoing engagement and discussion. Community leaders and spiritual leaders coordinated awareness campaigns before and after Juma (Friday) prayers at religious settings in Minchinabad.

This strategic timing allowed for the dissemination of information about ASD to congregants, leveraging the gathering of community members in a religious setting. Informational brief talks were utilized to raise awareness and encourage community members to learn more about ASD. All planned interventions were conducted through collaborative efforts involving community leaders, professionals, and spiritual leaders. Regular meetings and coordination sessions were held to ensure alignment of objectives, effective communication strategies, and equitable distribution of responsibilities. Stakeholder engagement was prioritized to foster a sense of ownership and collective responsibility for ASD awareness initiatives. Throughout the intervention implementation process, monitoring and evaluation mechanisms were put in place to assess the effectiveness and impact of the interventions. Key performance indicators, such as reach, engagement, and knowledge uptake, were tracked to measure progress and inform adjustments as needed. Feedback from community members was solicited to gather insights and perspectives on the interventions' outcomes.

Interventions Evaluation and Analysis

Table 2

Post-intervention Perceptions and Beliefs of the People about ASD in Minchinabad

Descriptions	SD (%)	D(%)	N(%)	A(%)	SA(%)
Sufficient awareness about ASD within the community.	8.	32	7	34	19
ASD is a curse.	16	37	8	23	16
ASD is a Disease.	12	19	6	42	21
ASD can be cured by medicine.	21	26	7	22	24
ASD can be cured by religious and spiritual treatments (murshad'sduaand taking them to Tombs of Aulia).	15	9	8	39	29
Stigma associated with seeking a diagnosis for ASD	21	9	10	39	21
Adequate Information about the signs and Symptoms of ASD.	13	39	8	25	15
Community-led awareness programs on ASD are organized.	18	41	11	24	6
Community-led awareness programs could positively impact the rate of ASD diagnosis.	1	5	5	53	3.6
Government initiatives can play a significant role in enhancing ASD awareness and diagnosis in Minchinabad.	1	6	7	49	37

The post-intervention perceptions and beliefs regarding ASD in Minchinabad indicate notable shifts in community attitudes and awareness levels. Shifts regarding the sufficiency of ASD awareness within the community. There is a significant increase in awareness. As 34% acknowledged adequate awareness compared to only 4% previously. However, there remains a substantial portion (40%) who still feel there is insufficient awareness. It indicates the need for further education and outreach efforts. Beliefs attributing ASD to divine factors also changed. The beliefs such as the curse of Allah Almighty have also changed with a decrease in agreement from 85% to 39%. This suggests a reduction in reliance on supernatural explanations for ASD. A significant proportion still holds such beliefs. While there is increased recognition of ASD as a disease (63%) indicating a more biomedical understanding.

However, there remains a notable percentage (31%) who hold alternative beliefs. The perception of

ASD curability through medicine has seen some improvement with (46%) now acknowledging compared to (86%) previously. However, beliefs in alternative treatments, such as “MURSHAD’S DUA” and visiting “TOMBS of AULIA,” remain prevalent among (68%) of respondents, indicating persistent cultural beliefs surrounding ASD treatment. The stigma associated with seeking an ASD diagnosis has slightly decreased. (60%) acknowledging its presence compared to (82%) previously. While this indicates some progress. A considerable portion of the community still perceives stigma. It highlights the importance of continued efforts to address misconceptions and promote acceptance. Regarding awareness programs, while there is recognition of their existence (35%). There remains uncertainty about their impact. As only (10%) strongly agree on their effectiveness in positively impacting ASD diagnosis rates. This suggests a need for ongoing evaluation and improvement of community-led initiatives. Lastly, there is widespread recognition of the potential role of government initiatives in enhancing ASD awareness and diagnosis. With (86%) agreeing on their significance. This underscores the importance of policy interventions in complementing community efforts and addressing systemic barriers to ASD support and inclusion.

Discussion

The findings from both the pre-intervention and post-intervention surveys shed light on the perceptions and beliefs regarding ASD awareness in Minchinabad. It aligns with existing literature on similar contexts. The initial survey highlighted a significant disparity between perceived and actual awareness levels of ASD within the community. It echoes findings from previous studies (Dillenburger, et al., 2013; Iqbal, et al., 2023). Despite a majority recognizing ASD as a disease, there was limited understanding of its management and prevalent reliance on cultural beliefs attributing it to divine factors. It mirrors findings on the influence of cultural and religious beliefs on ASD perceptions (de Leeuw et al., 2020; Harman, 2014). The post-intervention survey revealed positive shifts in community attitudes and awareness levels, consistent with the literature emphasizing the efficacy of community-led interventions in enhancing ASD awareness (Harman, 2014; Eqani, et al., 2020). The increase in the recognition of ASD as a health condition and the reduction in reliance on divine explanations suggest successful mitigation of cultural barriers to understanding. It aligns with previous research advocating for culturally sensitive approaches (Balcazar, et al., 2009). However, the persistence of alternative beliefs in treatments like “MURSHAD’S DUA” highlights the need for continued efforts to address cultural misconceptions. These findings underscore the importance of ongoing community engagement and collaborative initiatives involving religious and community leaders, consistent with literature advocating for partnership-based approaches (Collins, et al., 2018; Anuar et al., 2020). Furthermore, the effectiveness of government initiatives in enhancing ASD awareness emphasizes the significance of policy interventions. It echoes the literature on the importance of advocacy for policy changes to support ASD awareness (Agbate, 2023). The study’s findings align with existing literature on ASD awareness. This emphasizes the need for continued community-led interventions, collaboration with stakeholders, and advocacy for policy changes to promote understanding and acceptance of ASD in Minchinabad and similar areas.

CONCLUSION

The interventions aimed at enhancing awareness of ASD in Minchinabad have yielded promising outcomes. As evidenced by the post-intervention perceptions and beliefs of the community members. The analysis reveals a notable improvement in awareness levels and a greater proportion of individuals acknowledge the existence of ASD and the importance of awareness initiatives. This positive shift can be attributed to the diverse range of intervention strategies implemented. It includes community-led workshops, social media campaigns, and religious setting-based awareness activities. Despite the progress made, certain challenges persist. Cultural and religious beliefs continue to influence perceptions of ASD. A significant portion of the community still endorses alternative explanations for the condition. The stigma surrounding seeking a diagnosis remains a barrier to accessing necessary healthcare services, albeit to a lesser extent than before the interventions.

While the interventions have made significant strides in improving ASD awareness in Minchinabad. Sustained efforts are required to address remaining misconceptions and barriers. Continued community

engagement, particularly through religious and cultural channels, will be essential in fostering greater understanding and acceptance of ASD. Advocacy for policy changes to support ASD awareness and improve access to services is crucial for long-term impact. By collaborating with various stakeholders and maintaining momentum in awareness efforts, Minchinabad can work towards creating a more inclusive environment for individuals with ASD.

Recommendations

To further enhance ASD awareness and support in Minchinabad, several recommendations are proposed. Firstly, expanding community-led workshops is essential, involving healthcare professionals, educators, and community leaders to provide comprehensive and accurate information about ASD. Enhancing digital outreach through platforms such as WhatsApp and Facebook can help maintain engagement and reinforce learning by sharing educational content and success stories. Strengthening collaboration with religious leaders is crucial to dispel myths and reduce the stigma associated with ASD. Policy advocacy at local and national levels should prioritize ASD awareness programs, allocate resources for training healthcare professionals, and ensure access to diagnostic and intervention services. Implementing school-based programs will educate teachers and students, fostering a supportive environment for children with ASD. Specialized training for healthcare professionals is necessary to improve diagnosis and management, emphasizing culturally sensitive approaches. Regular monitoring and evaluation of awareness initiatives should be established, collecting community feedback to assess effectiveness and identify areas for improvement.

Encouraging local businesses and institutions to adopt inclusive practices will support individuals with ASD in work and learning environments. Creating support groups for families affected by ASD will provide emotional support and advocacy opportunities. Launching regular public awareness campaigns using local media will educate the broader public and promote acceptance. Lastly, conducting further research to understand the specific needs and challenges faced by individuals with ASD in Minchinabad will inform tailored interventions and policies. By implementing these recommendations, Minchinabad can build on the progress made through initial interventions, creating a more informed, inclusive, and supportive community for individuals with ASD.

Competing Interest

The authors had no competing interests.

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