

LIVED EXPERIENCES OF MOTHERS RAISING CHILDREN WITH ADHD: A QUALITATIVE STUDY

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Abstract

Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) is among the most prevalent neurodevelopmental disorders affecting children worldwide and has significant implications for family functioning and parental well-being. Mothers often assume the primary caregiving role and may experience substantial psychological, social, and financial challenges while raising a child with ADHD. Despite increasing global research on ADHD, limited studies have explored the lived experiences of mothers within the sociocultural context of Pakistan. The present study aimed to explore the lived experiences of mothers raising children diagnosed with ADHD across major urban regions of Pakistan. A qualitative phenomenological design was employed to gain in-depth insight into maternal caregiving experiences. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with mothers recruited through purposive sampling from Karachi, Lahore, and surrounding areas of Punjab. Data were collected through in-depth interviews and analyzed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). The study seeks to provide insight into the emotional, social, and contextual challenges faced by mothers as well as the coping strategies they adopt while managing the demands associated with ADHD. Five major themes emerged: financial strain related to treatment costs, social stigma arising from community judgment, emotional distress associated with children's impulsivity and hyperactivity, limited family support that exacerbated caregiving burdens, and maternal resilience expressed through faith-based coping and structured routines. Mothers cited systemic

service gaps, job compromises, loneliness, guilt, and persistent anxiety. Spiritual resources that are deeply ingrained in culture have been identified as essential safeguards for maintaining well-being. Understanding these experiences can contribute to the development of culturally sensitive interventions, improved mental health services, and increased societal awareness regarding ADHD in Pakistan.

Keywords: Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder, Mothers, Lived Experiences, Caregiving, Pakistan

Introduction

Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) is a neurodevelopmental condition characterized by persistent patterns of inattention, hyperactivity, and impulsivity that interfere with a child's functioning and development (Frank-Briggs, 2011; Paul et al., 2025). Children diagnosed with ADHD often experience difficulties in academic achievement, behavioral regulation, and social interactions (Berchiatti et al., 2022; Giannakopoulos, 2025). These difficulties frequently extend beyond the individual child and affect family dynamics, particularly the experiences of parents who are responsible for caregiving and behavioral management (Harborne et al., 2004). Parents of children with ADHD frequently encounter ongoing challenges in managing behavioral symptoms such as impulsive actions, hyperactivity, and difficulties maintaining attention (Frank-Briggs, 2011). These behaviors can disrupt daily family routines and create additional stress for caregivers, often influencing parenting practices and family relationships (Carr-Fanning & McGuckin, 2022; Brown et al., 2025).

Research suggests that parental coping strategies and protective factors can play a significant role in moderating behavioral difficulties and improving outcomes for children with ADHD (Verhagen et al., 2025). Additionally, psychological interventions such as acceptance and commitment therapy have shown potential in improving emotion regulation and behavioral functioning among children with ADHD (Hosseini et al., 2024). Among parents, mothers often assume the primary caregiving role, particularly in collectivistic societies where childcare responsibilities are traditionally associated with women (Aubel, 2024; Ochiai & Molony, 2008). In such contexts, women are often expected to remain submissive and suppress their emotions (Shahid et al., 2024; Shahid et al., 2025), which can have detrimental effects on their well-being (Bashir et al., 2024; Khan et al., 2024; Shahid et al., 2024; Shahid & Yaseen, 2025).

Within the Pakistani cultural context, caregiving roles are often strongly gendered, and women are commonly expected to manage household responsibilities alongside childrearing duties (Shah, 2026). When a child experiences behavioral or developmental difficulties, the responsibility of managing these challenges frequently falls upon mothers. As a result, mothers of children with ADHD may experience heightened emotional strain while balancing caregiving demands with societal expectations (Rizvi Jafree & Burhan, 2020; Arzeen et al., 2023).

Research conducted in Pakistan indicates that parents of children with developmental and behavioral conditions often face psychological, social, and practical challenges related to caregiving responsibilities (Nasir et al., 2024). Mothers, in particular, may experience higher levels of stress due to the continuous need to manage behavioral symptoms, educational demands, and social stigma associated with developmental conditions. These stressors can influence parenting practices and emotional well-being, especially when adequate support systems are limited (Anjum & Malik, 2010).

Furthermore, studies examining Pakistani mothers of children with developmental disorders, including ADHD, have reported increased levels of psychological distress, emotional burden, and mental health concerns (Zahra et al., 2025). These findings highlight the importance

of understanding the lived experiences of mothers raising children with ADHD within the sociocultural environment of Pakistan, where gender roles, family expectations, and limited support services may intensify caregiving challenges.

Limited awareness and widespread misconceptions about Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder can further complicate caregiving experiences. Behavioral symptoms associated with ADHD may be misinterpreted as deliberate disobedience, lack of discipline, or ineffective parenting. Consequently, mothers may experience criticism from relatives, teachers, and community members. Such social perceptions can contribute to feelings of guilt, isolation, and emotional exhaustion among caregivers (Salman et al., 2024; Kiran & Farooqi, 2025). In many communities, misunderstandings regarding behavioral and developmental conditions can influence parenting practices and responses toward children exhibiting hyperactive or inattentive behaviors. When ADHD symptoms are not recognized as part of a neurodevelopmental condition, parents may face pressure to adopt stricter disciplinary approaches, which can further strain family relationships and negatively influence child functioning (Kamran & Kazi, 2024). These sociocultural factors highlight the importance of improving public awareness and understanding of ADHD to support families and reduce stigma surrounding the condition.

In addition to psychological challenges, families managing ADHD may encounter structural barriers such as limited access to specialized mental health services. Behavioral therapy, psychological consultations, and educational support services are not always easily accessible, particularly in resource-limited settings. Although major cities such as Karachi and Lahore offer relatively greater access to healthcare services, awareness and availability of specialized ADHD interventions remain limited. These caregiving challenges can be understood through the lens of the Stress Process Model proposed by Pearlin et al. (1990). The model explains how caregiving responsibilities generate stress through multiple pathways, including primary stressors such as managing behavioral difficulties and secondary stressors such as financial burden, social stigma, and role strain. In the context of raising a child with ADHD, mothers may experience continuous emotional and practical demands that intensify psychological strain, particularly when institutional and social support systems are limited.

Despite these challenges, many mothers develop adaptive coping strategies to manage caregiving responsibilities. Family support, religious beliefs, and community networks can function as important coping resources that help mothers manage stress and maintain emotional resilience. According to the Stress Process Model, such personal and social resources may buffer the negative psychological impact of caregiving stressors and promote better emotional adjustment among caregivers (Aneshensel & Avison, 2015; Pearlin, 1990). Understanding these experiences within the Pakistani sociocultural environment is crucial for informing mental health policies and improving support systems for families affected by ADHD.

Rationale of the Study

Although ADHD is widely recognized as a common neurodevelopmental disorder, research examining the lived experiences of mothers raising children with ADHD in Pakistan remains limited. Existing literature within the country has largely focused on prevalence, diagnostic characteristics, and treatment approaches rather than the everyday realities faced by caregivers.

Understanding maternal experiences is particularly important in societies where caregiving roles are strongly gendered and where awareness of neurodevelopmental disorders remains limited.

Mothers often face complex emotional, social, and financial challenges while attempting to support their child's development.

Additionally, mental health resources in Pakistan remain unevenly distributed, with greater access to services in urban centers such as Karachi and Lahore compared to other regions. Even within these cities, families may face difficulties in obtaining specialized support services for ADHD.

Exploring the lived experiences of mothers across multiple regions of Pakistan can provide valuable insights into the challenges they encounter, the coping strategies they employ, and the broader contextual factors shaping their caregiving experiences. Such knowledge can inform the development of culturally appropriate interventions, public awareness initiatives, and policies aimed at improving support systems for families affected by ADHD.

Objectives

1. To investigate the real-life experiences of Pakistani women raising children with ADHD.
2. To investigate how raising a child with ADHD affects their social and personal lives in the long run.
3. To investigate the underlying causes of their difficulties in controlling their child's ADHD.
4. To investigate the psychological and emotional difficulties they genuinely encounter.
5. To investigate the coping mechanisms mothers, use to deal with their psychological issues.

Research Questions

1. What real-life experiences do Pakistani women have when raising children with ADHD?
2. How does raising a child with ADHD affect their social and personal lives in the long run?
3. How does emotional labor affect women raising children with ADHD in terms of their mental health and general well-being?
4. What are the underlying, unseen issues that affect their parenting experiences with a child with ADHD?
5. What are the main coping mechanisms women employ to deal with their psychological challenges?

Method

Research Design

Interpretative phenomenological research design was employed to explore the lived experiences of mothers raising children diagnosed with ADHD. Phenomenological research focuses on understanding how individuals interpret and make meaning of their personal experiences.

Participants

Participants consisted of mothers of children diagnosed with ADHD residing in major urban areas of Pakistan. Participants were recruited from Karachi, Lahore, and nearby areas of Punjab to capture diverse caregiving experiences across different sociocultural environments.

Sampling Technique

Purposive sampling was used to recruit participants who had direct experience raising children diagnosed with ADHD. The research sample consisted of mothers aged 20–35 years who

were raising a child diagnosed with ADHD. The final sample consisted of five participants. This sampling method allowed the researcher to select individuals capable of providing rich and meaningful insights into caregiving experiences.

Inclusion Criteria

Participants were required to be mothers of children diagnosed with ADHD, able to communicate their experiences, and willing to participate in the study. Only individuals who provided informed consent were included.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical principles were maintained throughout the research process. Participants were informed about the purpose and procedures of the study before data collection began. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, and confidentiality was strictly maintained by removing identifying information from interview transcripts. Participation was voluntary, and participants were informed that they could withdraw from the study at any stage without consequences.

Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews. This method allowed participants to share detailed accounts of their experiences while enabling the researcher to explore key topics related to caregiving, emotional well-being, and social challenges. Interviews were conducted in languages comfortable for participants, and audio recordings were made with their consent to ensure accurate documentation of responses.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), which focuses on understanding how individuals interpret their experiences within their personal and social contexts. The analytical process involved repeated reading of the interview transcripts, identification of significant statements, development of emergent themes, and interpretation of patterns across participants' narratives. This iterative approach enabled a deeper understanding of the meaning's participants attached to their caregiving experiences.

Results

Table 1.1

The transcribed interviews of each participant yielded the following superordinate themes related to the lived experiences of the participants.

Superordinate Theme	Master Theme	Emergent Theme
Emotional Challenges	Mental Health Impact	Worry and anxiety brought on by the child's impulsivity, hyperactivity, and lack of focus. Feelings of social condemnation, loneliness, and isolation.

	Emotional Resilience	Burnout, emotional tiredness, and signs of depression. Hope and faith as a coping strategy. Strengthened with time on an emotional level.
Social Impact	Social Perception and stigma	Being misinterpreted or seen by society as bad parenting. Fear of extended family reactions, avoidance, and rumours in the community. Fear of reactions from the community and extended family.
	Family Dynamics	Absence of assistance from a spouse or other family members. Family disputes, marital strain, and relationship strain.
Financial Issues	Economic Burden	High expenses for ADHD treatments, medicine, and therapy. Income interruptions, job loss, or fewer job openings.
	Resource Constraints	Limited local access to specialized services. Difficulty accessing healthcare.
Coping Strategies	Seeking Support	Limited local services in Pakistan that specialize in ADHD. Accessing remote medical services might be challenging.
	Personal Adaptation	Established daily schedules and guidelines for the child's behaviour. Self-learning through experience and support systems.
Awareness and Education	Knowledge Gaps	Insufficient community awareness, as ADHD is often perceived as indolence or a lack of self-control. Challenges in educating

Need for information	family members, neighbors, and schools. Desire for help, workshops, and training on ADHD
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Discussion

The present study aimed to explore the lived experiences of mothers raising children diagnosed with ADHD in Pakistan. Using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, the findings highlighted multiple interconnected challenges including emotional distress, social stigma, financial strain, and limited access to resources (Shah et al., 2025; Tareen et al., 2025). Mothers described persistent psychological pressure caused by their children's impulsivity, hyperactivity, and difficulties with attention, which often resulted in worry, anxiety, and emotional exhaustion (Bibi et al., 2024). These findings are consistent with previous research indicating that parents of children with ADHD experience higher levels of parenting stress and emotional burden due to the continuous need for behavioral management and supervision (Kiran & Farooqi, 2025).

Social stigma emerged as a significant theme influencing maternal well-being. Many mothers reported being judged by relatives, teachers, and members of the community who interpreted their child's behavior as a consequence of poor parenting rather than a neurodevelopmental condition (Shah et al., 2025). Such misconceptions contributed to feelings of guilt, isolation, and social withdrawal. Within the Pakistani sociocultural context, where motherhood is strongly associated with successful childrearing, mothers often internalized societal criticism, which further intensified emotional strain. These experiences demonstrate how social perceptions and cultural expectations can shape caregiving experiences and affect maternal mental health (Mirza et al., 2024).

Family dynamics also played an important role in shaping mothers' experiences. Some participants reported limited emotional or practical support from spouses or extended family members, leading to increased caregiving responsibilities and marital strain (Iqbal & Raza, 2023). The imbalance of caregiving roles often placed mothers at the center of behavioral management, educational coordination, and healthcare decision-making. These findings reflect broader gendered caregiving patterns in collectivistic societies where women frequently assume the primary responsibility for childrearing (Ahmed et al., 2024).

Financial difficulties were another prominent challenge reported by participants. The cost of medical consultations, therapy sessions, medication, and specialized educational services placed a considerable economic burden on families. In some cases, mothers had to reduce employment opportunities or leave their jobs to provide full-time care for their children. These findings are consistent with the results reported by Hussain and Khan (2025), who also found that the costs of consultations, medication, therapies, and specialized education place significant financial strain on families. Additionally, participants described structural barriers such as limited availability of specialized ADHD services and difficulties accessing trained professionals. These findings highlight systemic gaps within mental health infrastructure that may hinder timely intervention and adequate support for families managing ADHD.

Despite these challenges, the findings also revealed significant resilience among mothers. Many participants reported relying on coping strategies such as religious faith, emotional acceptance, structured daily routines, and self-education about ADHD. Previous research has also shown that mothers demonstrate resilience through organized routines and faith-based coping,

which is consistent with findings from around the world that adaptive strategies reduce the stress of providing care (Johnston et al., 2024).. These adaptive mechanisms helped mothers manage caregiving stress while maintaining hope for their children's development. The presence of emotional resilience suggests that culturally embedded coping resources, including spirituality and social support networks, can play a protective role in sustaining maternal well-being.

Limitations and Recommendations

Although the present study provides valuable insight into the experiences of mothers raising children with ADHD in Pakistan, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the study relied on a relatively small sample drawn primarily from urban areas such as Karachi and Lahore, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to mothers living in rural regions. Second, the study focused solely on mothers' perspectives, while the experiences of fathers, siblings, and other caregivers were not explored. Third, while the qualitative design provides rich and in-depth insights, it does not allow for statistical generalization to larger populations. Future research should include larger and more diverse samples across different regions of Pakistan to capture broader caregiving experiences. Researchers may also consider examining the perspectives of fathers and extended family members to better understand family dynamics in ADHD caregiving. Additionally, mixed-methods studies could provide deeper insights by combining qualitative experiences with quantitative measures of parental stress and well-being. At the policy level, there is a need to develop community awareness programs, provide training workshops for parents and teachers, and expand access to specialized mental health services to better support families raising children with ADHD.

Implications

The findings of this study have important practical and theoretical implications for mental health professionals, educators, and policymakers in Pakistan. First, the study highlights the need for increased public awareness regarding Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder to reduce stigma and misconceptions surrounding children's behavioral difficulties and parenting practices. Second, the results suggest that psychological support services and counseling programs should be developed specifically for mothers of children with ADHD to address emotional stress and caregiver burnout. Third, schools and educational institutions should introduce training programs for teachers to better understand ADHD and support affected children in academic settings. Additionally, healthcare systems should expand access to affordable diagnostic and therapeutic services to reduce financial barriers faced by families. Finally, community-based support groups and parental training workshops may help mothers develop effective coping strategies and strengthen social support networks.

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