

Empowering Women with ADHD: The Role of Social Work in Challenging Stigma and Promoting Equity

Ying Meng

University of Pecs, 7621, Hungary

ABSTRACT

This study explores the unique challenges faced by women with ADHD in terms of diagnosis, treatment, and social inclusion, emphasizing the critical role social work plays in reducing stigma and promoting gender-sensitive support, and gender equality for female patients. Through a theoretical analysis that incorporates social constructivism and empowerment theory, this study explores how gender norms influence the diagnosis and treatment of ADHD, while emphasizing the transformative potential of social work interventions. Findings suggest that women with ADHD are disproportionately affected by stigmatization and systemic inadequacies, leading to mental health burdens and social challenges. This article calls for gender-sensitive social work practice and cross-cultural policies to promote equity in ADHD care.

KEYWORDS

ADHD; Women; Social Stigma; Social Work; Gender Equity

1 Introduction

Attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) is a neurodevelopmental disorder traditionally associated with externalizing symptoms such as hyperactivity and impulsivity and is usually seen in males. However, a growing body of evidence suggests that there are significant gender differences in the presentation of ADHD, particularly in females, who tend to internalize symptoms in the form of inattention, mood dysregulation, and emotional instability. These characteristics often conflict with societal expectations of women, who are expected to be organized, emotionally stable, and able to multitask. This discrepancy leads to systemic bias in diagnosis and treatment, resulting in delayed or inaccurate diagnosis of women and exacerbating their psychological and social challenges. The role of gender stigma in the perpetuation of these challenges is critical. Existing research suggests that women with ADHD are often misperceived as “lazy” or “overly emotional,” and that their symptoms are mistaken for personal deficits rather than manifestations of neurodevelopmental disorders. This stigmatization not only delays appropriate intervention, but also contributes to mental health burdens such as low self-esteem, anxiety, and depression. Additionally, the intersection of ADHD symptoms with societal and workplace expectations creates a double burden for women as they struggle to balance traditional family responsibilities with professional or academic demands, and instead receive inadequate support. Healthcare and social systems have largely failed to address these unique challenges. Misdiagnosis is common, as healthcare providers often focus on emotional symptoms such as anxiety or depression without recognizing the core features of ADHD. This oversight highlights a broader deficiency in healthcare practice, where gender-sensitive diagnostic tools and treatments remain underdeveloped. These problems are also exacerbated by the lack of effective support systems in educational and work

environments, which further isolates women with ADHD and limits their opportunities for personal and professional growth.

Despite these barriers, emerging research points to the transformative potential of social work interventions. Through advocacy, support groups, and counseling, social workers have successfully reduced stigma, enhanced coping mechanisms, and improved the mental health of women with ADHD. These gender-sensitive approaches are consistent with empowerment theory in social work, which emphasizes emotional support, education, and advocacy to enable individuals to cope with societal challenges and improve their quality of life. Given the systemic challenges faced by women with ADHD and the vast potential for social work interventions, this study sought to explore how gender stigma affects the diagnosis, treatment, and social experiences of women with ADHD. This study explores specific gaps in healthcare and social support systems that exacerbate their challenges and assesses the impact of gender-sensitive social work interventions on their mental health, self-esteem, and social functioning.

To address the unique challenges faced by women with ADHD, this study employs a theoretical approach that synthesizes insights from social constructivism and empowerment theory, focusing on analyzing existing literature and theoretical frameworks to understand how gendered norms influence the diagnosis, treatment, and social experiences of women with ADHD. This approach provides a nuanced perspective on how social expectations and systemic barriers exacerbate stigmatization and impede effective support. By examining the transformative potential of gender-sensitive social work interventions, the study highlights ways to reduce stigmatization and improve quality of life for women with ADHD. Through its analysis, the study contributes to the development of equitable diagnostic approaches and support systems to meet the unique needs of this population.

2 Literature Review

Research on Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) has predominantly focused on male presentations, creating significant gaps in understanding the disorder's unique manifestations and impacts on women. Evidence highlights disparities in diagnosis, symptomatology, and treatment outcomes between genders, with women often displaying internalized symptoms such as inattention, emotional dysregulation, and mood swings, unlike the externalizing behaviors observed in males^[1]. These differences contribute to underdiagnosis or misdiagnosis, as women are frequently labeled with anxiety or depression instead of ADHD^[2]. Diagnostic criteria, largely reflecting male symptomatology, further exacerbate these challenges^[3].

Stigma acts as a pervasive barrier for women with ADHD. Societal expectations, which emphasize caregiving and organizational roles, conflict with the lived experiences of women with ADHD, leading to feelings of shame, reduced self-esteem, and heightened vulnerability to depression^{[1][4]}. Stigma also discourages timely diagnosis and treatment^[2]. Intersectional factors, including socioeconomic status and cultural biases, amplify these challenges. Marginalized women face compounded disadvantages due to systemic inequities, limiting access to healthcare and discouraging help-seeking behaviors^[5]. The functional impairments associated with ADHD significantly impact women's daily lives, particularly in balancing personal, professional, and familial responsibilities. Executive dysfunction, such as poor time management and disorganization, undermines their ability to meet societal expectations^[2]. Workplace and educational environments often lack accommodations for neurodiverse individuals, further exacerbating stress and burnout^[1].

Social work interventions show promise in addressing these challenges. Narrative therapy fosters resilience by reframing ADHD experiences^[5], while group interventions offer emotional support and

practical coping strategies^[2]. Quantitative analyses reveal that women participating in these programs report higher self-esteem, improved quality of life, and reduced anxiety^[6]. Empowerment theory, underscores the importance of tailored interventions in enhancing self-perception and social participation.

However, current research is limited by small, homogenous samples and a reliance on cross-sectional designs, restricting the generalizability and understanding of long-term intervention outcomes. Future studies should prioritize diverse, longitudinal approaches to comprehensively address the multifaceted impacts of ADHD on women^[7].

3 Theoretical framework

This paper combines social constructivism and empowerment theory to analyze the experiences of women with ADHD. Social constructivism provides a lens for understanding how social norms and expectations shape women's perceptions of ADHD symptoms. It emphasizes the role of social context in constructing gendered realities and how these constructs influence the diagnosis, treatment, and social participation of women with ADHD. Empowerment theory, on the other hand, provides a framework for understanding how social work interventions can empower women with ADHD by challenging social stereotypes and providing them with the necessary emotional and practical support. Together, these two theoretical frameworks illustrate the intersection of gender, stigma and ADHD and suggest effective intervention strategies.

4 Analysis and discussion

The challenges faced by women with ADHD largely stem from the social expectations linked to traditional gender roles and the characteristics of the neurodevelopmental disorder itself. Society has historically placed significant emphasis on women's ability to be organized, emotionally stable, and capable of multitasking. These traits are considered essential for fulfilling the societal roles expected of women. However, women with ADHD often exhibit internalized symptoms such as distractibility and emotional dysregulation, alongside deficits in executive functioning, including time-management difficulties and planning challenges. These traits, which are central to ADHD in women, are seen as contradictory to societal norms and expectations for women. As a result, women with ADHD often face difficulties in meeting the external demands placed on them, leading to feelings of inadequacy, frustration, and distress.

The healthcare system has long been shaped by a diagnostic framework that centers on male ADHD characteristics, such as hyperactivity and impulsivity. This male-centered framework has contributed to a systemic diagnostic bias, where women's ADHD symptoms are often overlooked or misinterpreted. Women with ADHD are more likely to be diagnosed with mood disorders such as anxiety or depression, rather than ADHD. Studies have shown that approximately 60% of women with ADHD were initially misdiagnosed with mood disorders during their first medical consultation. This misdiagnosis not only delays the proper intervention but also exacerbates the psychological distress faced by these women. The resulting delay in diagnosis can lead to prolonged untreated ADHD, which further exacerbates problems such as low self-esteem, loneliness, anxiety, and social impairments. These diagnostic delays and biases reflect a critical issue within healthcare systems that fail to adequately recognize the gendered differences in ADHD symptomatology.

From an intersectional perspective, gender is just one of many factors that shape the experiences of women with ADHD. According to intersectionality theory, race, class, and socio-economic status intersect with gender to create distinct experiences of ADHD. Women who are marginalized due to

their race, ethnicity, or socio-economic status often face even greater barriers to diagnosis and treatment. Research suggests that these women may be less likely to receive an ADHD diagnosis due to economic constraints, lack of access to healthcare resources, or cultural stigmas that discourage seeking help. For example, women from low-income backgrounds or ethnic minority groups may struggle to access diagnostic services, resulting in untreated or undiagnosed ADHD. These women are also more likely to face compounded disadvantages, such as discrimination and inadequate social support, which make it harder for them to seek or benefit from treatment.

Social work interventions have proven to be particularly effective in supporting women with ADHD, especially when grounded in empowerment theory. Empowerment theory focuses on enhancing self-confidence, self-efficacy, and resilience by providing individuals with the tools to overcome challenges and navigate societal barriers. Social workers can use this framework to help women with ADHD reclaim control over their lives, challenge the stigma surrounding their condition, and build stronger, more supportive relationships. For example, support groups can provide women with ADHD a safe space to share their experiences, connect with others, and reduce feelings of isolation. These groups foster a sense of belonging and unity, which is crucial for women who may feel alienated due to their ADHD symptoms. Narrative therapy, another essential intervention, can help women with ADHD reshape their self-perception. By reframing ADHD symptoms as traits rather than deficiencies, women can develop a more positive view of themselves. Research has shown that women with ADHD who engage in narrative therapy report significant improvements in mental health, self-esteem, and overall life satisfaction. Social workers also play a critical advocacy role in promoting policy change and public awareness. One of their most important functions is to educate the public about ADHD, particularly its gendered manifestations. Through community education programs, social workers can challenge existing stereotypes about ADHD and help the public understand that the symptoms of ADHD can differ significantly between men and women. Public awareness campaigns, such as lectures or media outreach, can also be effective in reducing the stigma that often surrounds ADHD, encouraging more women to seek help and support.

Despite the potential of social work interventions, systemic barriers still exist, requiring broader societal and institutional change. In education, for example, schools need to provide more tailored support for women with ADHD, such as personalized learning plans, time management training, and individualized academic accommodations. These supports can help women with ADHD navigate the educational system more successfully. In the workplace, employers must become more aware of ADHD and its symptoms. This awareness can lead to a more supportive environment for women with ADHD, allowing them to thrive professionally without facing unnecessary judgment or punitive measures for behaviors related to their condition. Cross-cultural research is another critical area for improving the support systems for women with ADHD. Different cultures have varying approaches to the understanding and treatment of ADHD, and cross-cultural studies can provide valuable insights into how ADHD is perceived and managed globally. This research can help identify culturally sensitive interventions that may be more effective in diverse contexts. While much of the current research on social work interventions for women with ADHD focuses on short-term outcomes, it is essential to conduct longitudinal studies that examine the long-term effects of these interventions. Longitudinal research would allow for a deeper understanding of how empowerment-based social work interventions affect the lives of women with ADHD over time, providing stronger evidence for policy changes and the development of more effective treatment strategies.

In conclusion, women with ADHD face significant challenges, shaped by gendered expectations, diagnostic biases, and intersectional factors. Social work has a vital role to play in addressing these challenges, particularly through empowerment-based interventions that focus on enhancing self-efficacy, reducing stigma, and advocating for systemic change. However, long-term solutions

require not only social work interventions but also broad societal and institutional reforms to ensure that women with ADHD have equal access to diagnosis, treatment, and support.

5 Conclusion and suggestions

This study explores the unique challenges faced by women with ADHD in diagnosis, treatment, and social integration, particularly the conflict between gender role expectations and symptoms of neurodevelopmental disorders. Traditionally, societal expectations of women have focused on organizational skills, emotional stability, and multitasking abilities, whereas women with ADHD typically exhibit internalized symptoms such as inattention and mood dysregulation, as well as deficits in executive functioning such as time management and planning. These symptoms conflict with societal expectations of women, resulting in women facing more challenges in social interactions, which in turn exacerbate psychological distress and self-denial.

The current healthcare system has long based its diagnostic criteria on male ADHD symptoms, such as hyperactivity and impulsivity, which significantly hinders the accurate diagnosis of women. Research shows that about 60% of women with ADHD are misdiagnosed with mood disorders such as anxiety or depression during their first medical consultation^[8-9]. This gender bias not only delays diagnosis but also exacerbates psychological distress in women, including low self-esteem, anxiety, and social impairment. As noted by Salciunas^[10], these biases are reinforced by societal expectations and cognitive distortions that frame ADHD symptoms as personal failings, further isolating women and limiting their opportunities for timely intervention. Intersectionality theory emphasizes that gender is only one of the factors that shape the experiences of women with ADHD. Other factors, such as race, class, and socioeconomic status, intersect to influence their access to diagnosis and treatment. Marginalized women, particularly those from low-income or minority groups, face additional barriers, including financial constraints, inadequate healthcare resources, and cultural biases that discourage help-seeking behaviors. These compounded disadvantages often lead to social exclusion and medical neglect, as highlighted in studies like those by Wender and Morrison^[11-12].

Social workers can play a pivotal role in addressing these challenges through gender-sensitive practices rooted in empowerment theory. Advocacy for ADHD diagnostic criteria that account for gender differences is critical to ensuring timely and accurate identification of female ADHD traits^[9]. Additionally, narrative therapy, as described by Morrison^[11], has shown promise in reframing ADHD symptoms as strengths rather than deficits, helping women build self-efficacy and resilience. Community-based education programs can further reduce stigma by raising public awareness of the unique manifestations of ADHD in women^[8]. In education, schools should provide individualized support for female students with ADHD, including time management training and personalized learning plans, as suggested by Nadeau^[13]. These interventions can help students overcome academic challenges and develop essential skills for future success. In the workplace, employers should implement flexible working arrangements and improve awareness of ADHD to create a supportive environment where women with ADHD can thrive professionally without fear of discrimination or stigma.

Cross-cultural research, such as that explored by Wender^[12], is vital for understanding the global variations in ADHD perceptions and developing culturally sensitive intervention programs. By fostering international collaboration, social workers can draw on diverse experiences to create effective, adaptable models for supporting women with ADHD. Furthermore, longitudinal studies are needed to evaluate the long-term outcomes of empowerment-based interventions, providing stronger evidence for policy changes and systemic reforms. While social work interventions offer

significant potential, addressing the root causes of the challenges faced by women with ADHD requires broader societal and institutional changes. Public policies must prioritize inclusivity in education and workplaces, and healthcare systems must develop gender-sensitive diagnostic tools and treatment programs. Collaboration across sectors—including government, healthcare, education, and social work—is essential to creating a society that values and supports neurodiverse individuals.

In conclusion, women with ADHD face multifaceted challenges shaped by gender biases, intersectional barriers, and systemic inadequacies. Social work plays a crucial role in mitigating these challenges through advocacy, education, and empowerment-based interventions. However, to achieve equity in diagnosis, treatment, and social support, broader reforms at policy, educational, and societal levels are imperative. Only through a holistic approach can we ensure that women with ADHD have equal opportunities to thrive personally, socially, and professionally.

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