

A qualitative study of the service experiences of women with autism spectrum disorder

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Women with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) remain relatively understudied compared with men with ASD and we have a limited understanding of their service needs. To address this gap in the literature, we conducted focus groups with 20 women with ASD without intellectual disability. The focus group discussions centered on what services women used, what services they needed but were unable to access, and what barriers were preventing them from accessing the services they needed. We analyzed the data using thematic analysis, a technique that emphasizes patterns or themes within the data. Three primary themes emerged from the focus groups relating to: (1) how many service providers disregarded or misunderstood women's service needs due to them having an unconventional presentation of ASD; (2) the difficulties many women experienced communicating their service needs to service providers, many of whom had little ASD experience; (3) the unavailability and/or ineffectiveness of existing services to meet women's individualized service needs, particularly with respect to mental health, employment, and residential supports. Our findings demonstrate that increased awareness by researchers and service providers of the range of service needs of women with ASD is needed.