

# Autism, Stigma and Achievements of Bangladesh

Tanjir Rashid Soron\*

Cyberpsychology Research and Consultation Center Mogbazar, Dhaka, Bangladesh

## Introduction

Bangladesh is a South East Asian developing country with moderate literacy rate. Here mental illness is quite prevalent and a huge burden. There is a widespread tendency to stigmatize people with mental illness in the developing countries. The mentally ill people and families are victims of social devaluation, discrimination and injustice. The stigma extends from neurodevelopmental to neurocognitive disorders. Parents of low-income countries experience a social stigma for having a child with Autism Spectrum Disorder or mental illness. They encounter social discrimination and experience increased levels of parental stress. Researchers reported that the parental increased stress caused limited father-child interactions; reduced childcare responsibilities and increased tendency to substances abuse among fathers whose children having autism [1]. People of developing countries mental hardly consider that mental illness has sufficient scientific basis and adequate treatment options. A study conducted by National Institute of Mental Health of Bangladesh revealed that more than 50% rural people of the study had faith on traditional healers. Moreover, they considered that the autism and other mental disorders were caused by ill spirits and required some measure other than medication [2]. Even the governments had negative and stigmatized view on mental illness and the adverse consequences and burden of these problems. Sometimes they think there is no cure of mental illness and there is no use in investing in this sector. This false belief and stigma act as a barrier to promote scientific management for the mental disorders including autism. To reduce this problem a strong political commitment and a holistic approach is need.

The current government of Bangladesh has shown a strong political commitment in reducing the stigma related to autism and its management. The Ministry of Primary and Mass Education has developed a short episode of 'Meena' cartoon to raise awareness of autism and staged an interactive popular theater in 158 sub-district level on autism. In June of 2010, "The Center for Neurodevelopment and Autism in Children (CNAC)" was inaugurated and ten "Shishu Bikash Kendra (Child Development Centers) were developed in the medical colleges and other specialized centers. Moreover, the government initiated 73 Disability Service Centre in district and Upazila (subdistrict) level with a special "Autism Corner". Autism was incorporated in the primary education curriculum. "Autism" related chapter was included in the "Physical Teaching, Health Science and Sports" book of grade nine and ten, moreover few information on autism is provided almost in every grades. It was an important step to combat the stigma. The government has developed strategic action plan for children with special needs under umbrella of inclusive education. All children with autism are allowed to get 20 minutes extra time in public examinations. There are two percent reserved seats for autistic children for admission in private sectors. Moreover, National Autism Academy was established under Ministry of Education to conduct substantial research to develop culturally sensitive, cost-effective and intervention based curriculum and contents [3]. Bangladesh hosted the largest regional conference on autism in July 2012. In the conference, Dhaka Declaration on Autism Spectrum Disorders was ratified by seven regional countries. Bangladesh tabled "Resolution 67/82" Addressing the socioeconomic needs of individuals, families and societies affected by autism spectrum

disorders, developmental disorders and associated disabilities at the United General Assembly in 2013, which was unanimously adopted. A 'One Stop Mobile Service' program is running to reach families that live in villages that lack accessibility to medical services. The government used electronic, print and social media, donated huge fund, developed new infrastructure and involved the celebrities and national and international political figures. Social media sites like Facebook play an important role with others electronic media. Facebook pages, support groups and video clips helped to connect and share the successful story of autistic children. Every year, on 2<sup>nd</sup> April, the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare (MoHFW) observes the "World Autism Awareness Day". All these measures reduce stigma such a level that even a child of the country knows about the basic information of autism, people are no longer afraid of seeking help for autism and acknowledge this problem in society. However, the government is not very much concerned about other Neurodevelopmental Disorders, Schizophrenia, Bipolar and Depressive Disorders, Anxiety Disorder Trauma and Stress related Disorders and so on.

However, the other mental disorder such as depression, which is more prevalent and has a higher burden of disability, gets no attention. With adequate treatment, a depressed person can lead a normal life. Schizophrenia is still highly stigmatized; many patients of schizophrenia are wandering in the streets of the country. They are homeless, careless and undiagnosed. Nobody cares for them. Basic human rights of these people are hardly maintained. If the government provides the same concentration about other mental illness like autism, the country may be a role model of combating stigma regarding mental illness. The National Parliament of Bangladesh has promulgated two important acts to protect the rights and ensure safety of the disable persons including autism and schizophrenia. One act is (i) The Disability Rights Law, 2013 and the other is (ii) Neuro Developmental Disability Protection Trust Act, 2013. It was one of the greatest news for disabled people. However, the act is hardly implemented in case of schizophrenia because of stigma, lack of concern or less political commitment and social participation. Hopefully, the country will maintain and increase its initiatives for better mental health.

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\*Corresponding author: Tanjir Rashid Soron, Dhaka, Bangladesh, Tel: 8801718827138; E-mail: [tanjirSORON@yahoo.com](mailto:tanjirSORON@yahoo.com)

Received July 24, 2015; Accepted August 21, 2015; Published August 29, 2015

Citation: Soron TR (2015) Autism, Stigma and Achievements of Bangladesh. *J Psychiatry* 18: 320 doi: [10.4172/2378-5756.1000320](https://doi.org/10.4172/2378-5756.1000320)

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