

World Autism Awareness Day 2022: inclusive quality education for all

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Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is a category of neurodevelopmental disorders the prevalence of which has increased over time. Since 2008 the United Nations has started celebrating 2nd April as the world autism awareness day each year to raise awareness. As like the previous years, in 2022 world autism awareness day has been observed worldwide. This year's theme was "Inclusive Quality Education for All". It was observed through various activities home and abroad. The government of Bangladesh is giving priority to Autism and Neurodevelopmental Disorders in many areas like protection of rights, inclusiveness, service and education.

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Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is a category of neurodevelopmental disorders characterized by social and communication impairment and restricted or repetitive behaviors.¹ The reported prevalence of children with ASD has increased over time. This increase may be attributable to several factors, including broadening in the diagnostic criteria with ongoing revisions of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM), the more inclusive definition of pervasive developmental disorder with the adoption of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fourth Edition (DSM-IV) in 1994, increased public awareness of the disorder and its symptoms, recommendations for universal screening for ASD.² Systematic reviews suggest a prevalence rate of 1 per 100 in developed countries with a lower rate in developing countries. High rates (3%) have been reported in South Korea and Japan. These findings will need replication as cultural, or measurement issues may have contributed.³

Throughout its history, the United Nations has embraced diversity and advocated for the rights and well-being of people with disabilities, such as learning and developmental disabilities. It is a critical tool for fostering a more inclusive and caring society for all people, as well as ensuring that all children and adults with autism can live full and meaningful lives. The United Nations General Assembly overwhelmingly declared April 2nd as World Autism Awareness Day (A/RES/62/139) to emphasize

the importance of assisting persons with autism in improving their quality of life so that they can live full and meaningful lives as contributing members of society since 2008.⁴

As like the previous years, in 2022 world autism awareness day has been observed worldwide. This year's theme was "Inclusive Quality Education for All". There are several approaches to educate children with Autism. Most simply they can be classified as Inclusive Education- Regular primary schools providing education for all children; Integrated Education- A special unit within the compound of the regular school providing a resource room and resource teachers to support children with disabilities; Special Education- A segregated education setting that follows a special curriculum and provides teaching materials and aids and special teachers for children with disabilities; and lastly Vocational and technical education. Over the last decade, significant progress has been made in expanding educational opportunities for people with autism in general. However, when the COVID-19 pandemic spread over the world in 2020, most countries announced temporary school closures, affecting more than 90% of the kids globally. The pandemic's interruption of learning has halted years of progress and increased educational inequality. Many students with autism have been particularly badly hit and studies reveal that interruptions to routines, as well as services and supports

that they rely on have disproportionately affected them.⁵

The 17 sustainable development goals (SDG) which were endorsed by world leaders at the United Nations in 2015, present a roadmap for addressing the world's key concerns including inequality. As the cornerstone for enhancing people's lives and decreasing disparities, sustainable development goal 4 (SDG 4) focuses on guaranteeing inclusive and equitable quality education and fostering lifelong learning opportunities for all. SDG 4's particular aims include ensuring "equal access to all levels of education and vocational training" for people with disabilities, as well as constructing and renovating disability-friendly educational facilities that enable "inclusive and effective learning environments for all."⁶

The issue of inclusive education is inextricably tied to last year's world autism awareness day theme, "Inclusion in the Workplace." Panelists at last year's event underlined the importance of promoting inclusive, high-quality education for people on the autism spectrum so that they can realize their full potential and achieve long-term employment success. In this regard, inclusive education is the key to realizing the revolutionary potential of the sustainable development goals, which is to LEAVE NO ONE BEHIND. The main purpose of Inclusive Education for the children with autism is to provide a fundamental human right, educational opportunities to all children without discrimination, education that is accepted by society, having right to society and gain a sense of belonging, improved cognitive and social outcomes, etc.

The government of Bangladesh is giving priority to Autism and Neurodevelopmental disorders in many areas like inclusiveness, service and education. In 2011, Dhaka hosted a large international conference on autism and NDDs that was organized by the Government of Bangladesh (GoB), World Health Organization (WHO) and Autism Speaks. There were more than 1,000 delegates from 26 countries, as well as several dignitaries from the region, namely Sheikh Hasina, the Prime Minister of Bangladesh and the chief guest of the conference. That conference and the ensuing Dhaka Declaration on Autism Spectrum Disorders and Developmental Disabilities sparked a massive nationwide movement that put autism firmly in the public consciousness. Where 15 years ago Bangladeshis didn't know what these disorders were, today, the word "autism" is established in the Bengali vocabulary that even rural people know about.

Bangladesh has already established the necessary political will as evidenced by the passing of the Rights and Protection of Persons with Disabilities Act 2013,

Neuro-Developmental Disability Protection Trust Act-2013, Bangladesh Rehabilitation Council Act 2018 and Integrated Special Education Policy 2019 and the setup of the National Steering Committee for Autism & NDDs (NSCAND) in 2012. The government has already provided online training to 390 parents or guardians in 190 upazilas of 53 districts of Bangladesh amid COVID-19 situation to give home-based care and care of mental health of children and persons with autism. At the same time, 450 teachers from 115 schools in 105 upazilas of 60 districts have been trained and this is an ongoing process. Two online applications called 'Bolte Chai' and 'Autism Barta' have been created. Under the NDD Protection Trust, 'Autism and NDD Service Centers' are being set up in 14 upazilas this year as a pilot project and through these centers, 17 different types of services including international standard early intervention will be provided to NDD children and individuals with autism through multi-disciplinary team with social and medical methods.

Once upon a time, autism was a neglected public health issue. There was a negative perception in the society about this. However, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's daughter and school psychologist, Saima Wazed's relentless efforts have raised awareness about autism nationally and internationally. We can hope for a better future for the people with autism now.

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