

Navigating Challenges and Opportunities to Adulthood with MOONFLOWER Autism Foundation in Bangladesh

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ABSTRACT

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is increasingly recognized as a major developmental and public health concern worldwide. In Bangladesh, awareness regarding autism has improved over the last two decades; however, the transition from adolescence to adulthood for individuals with autism remains extremely challenging. Limited vocational opportunities, social stigma, inadequate adult services, financial hardship, and lack of inclusive policies continue to marginalize autistic adults and their families.

MOONFLOWER Autism Foundation, a parent-led non-profitable organization in Dhaka, Bangladesh, has emerged as a significant initiative addressing these gaps through education, life-skills training, advocacy, and community inclusion. This article explores the challenges and opportunities faced by autistic individuals transitioning to adulthood in Bangladesh, highlights the role of MOONFLOWER Autism Foundation, and presents the case study of Marzook, a young autistic adult whose journey demonstrates both the barriers and possibilities within the Bangladeshi context.

Introduction

Autism Spectrum Disorder affects communication, social interaction, sensory processing, and adaptive behavior. Although early intervention services for children with autism are gradually expanding in Bangladesh, adult-centered services remain scarce. Many families experience uncertainty and anxiety about the future of their children once they reach adolescence and adulthood. Bangladesh has made important progress in autism awareness at policy and advocacy levels during the past decade. However, the practical implementation of inclusive education, employment, community living, and adult support systems is still limited. Families often face isolation, financial burden, and emotional stress while caring for autistic adolescents and adults. In this context, MOONFLOWER Autism Foundation was established in December 2022 by experienced parents and professionals who had long (1998) been involved in autism advocacy and special education in Bangladesh. The organization focuses on education, rehabilitation, life-skills development, advocacy, and empowerment for individuals with autism and their families.

Autism and Adulthood in Bangladesh

Limited Transition Planning

Most autism services in Bangladesh are concentrated on

early childhood intervention. Once individuals with autism reach adolescence, families often encounter a sudden lack of structured support. Transition planning for adulthood—including vocational training, independent living skills, employment preparation, sexuality education, and mental health support—is still underdeveloped. Schools and therapy centers often emphasize academic or behavioral goals without preparing students for real-life adult responsibilities. Consequently, many autistic young adults remain socially isolated and financially dependent on their families.

Social Stigma and Cultural Barriers

Despite increasing awareness campaigns, stigma surrounding autism continues in many communities. Families may hide autistic family members due to fear of discrimination or social judgment. Misconceptions regarding autism as a “disease,” “curse,” or “mental illness” still exist, especially in rural and underserved communities. Online discussions from Bangladeshi communities reveal ongoing frustrations regarding lack of understanding, sensory-friendly environments, and quality support services. Some parents report negative experiences in educational and therapy settings, while autistic adults describe social exclusion and inadequate accommodations.

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Financial Burden on Families

Therapy, special education, transportation, and healthcare expenses impose major financial burdens on families. Many middle-income and low-income households struggle to continue long-term intervention services. Adult vocational programs and residential facilities are extremely limited and often unaffordable. In addition, Bangladesh lacks sufficient government-supported adult autism services. Families therefore carry most caregiving responsibilities throughout the lifespan of the autistic individual.

Employment Challenges

Employment opportunities for autistic adults in Bangladesh remain minimal. Many employers lack awareness regarding neurodiversity and workplace accommodations. Autistic individuals with moderate or high support needs often face exclusion from the formal workforce.

Even highly capable autistic adults encounter barriers related to communication differences, sensory sensitivities, and social prejudice. Without vocational support, many remain unemployed despite having valuable talents and abilities.

The Role of Moonflower Autism Foundation

MOONFLOWER Autism Foundation was founded by devoted parents and experienced professionals committed to improving the quality of life for individuals with autism in Bangladesh. The organization operates educational and training programs emphasizing life skills, communication, independence, and social inclusion.

The Foundation's vision centers on rehabilitation, empowerment, dignity, and inclusion for autistic individuals and their families. Its work extends beyond classroom education and addresses broader developmental needs, including:

Functional communication development

Activities of daily living

Social and behavioral support

Parent training and counseling

Community awareness programs

Teacher training and professional development

Vocational and pre-vocational skill building

Advocacy for rights and inclusion

Importantly, the Foundation promotes a strengths-based perspective, recognizing that autistic individuals can learn, contribute, and participate meaningfully in society when given appropriate support. The organization also provides support for children from low-income families through educational assistance, food support, transportation, and therapy-related services.

Case Study: Marzook's Journey to Adulthood

Marzook (pseudonym), a young autistic adult from Dhaka,

represents the experiences of many families navigating autism and adulthood in Bangladesh.

Early Childhood

Marzook demonstrated developmental differences from an early age. He had limited speech, repetitive behaviors, sensory sensitivities, and difficulties with social interaction. His parents initially struggled to understand his condition due to lack of awareness and social misconceptions surrounding autism. After receiving an autism diagnosis, the family faced emotional distress, financial pressure, and uncertainty about the future. Accessing quality services was difficult, and many educational environments lacked trained professionals capable of supporting autistic learners effectively.

Educational Challenges

As Marzook grew older, mainstream educational settings became increasingly difficult. Overcrowded classrooms, rigid academic expectations, and limited individualized support created significant barriers. Social isolation and bullying further affected his emotional well-being. Eventually, Marzook became involved with MOONFLOWER Autism Foundation, where educators adopted individualized teaching approaches tailored to his communication style, sensory needs, and strengths.

Development of Life Skills

At MOONFLOWER Autism Foundation, Marzook participated in structured activities emphasizing practical life skills rather than academic achievement alone. He gradually improved in:

Self-care routines

Functional communication

Emotional regulation

Community participation

Social interaction

Vocational readiness activities

Teachers and caregivers used consistent routines, visual supports, positive reinforcement, and family collaboration to build his confidence and independence.

Family Empowerment

Marzook's family also received counseling and guidance. Parent involvement became a crucial component of his progress. The Foundation encouraged collaboration between teachers and caregivers to ensure consistency between home and school environments.

The family reported reduced stress and greater optimism regarding Marzook's future. Rather than focusing solely on limitations, they began recognizing his abilities, preferences, and potential contributions to society.

Transition Toward Adulthood

Although challenges remain, Marzook's journey demonstrates that autistic young adults in Bangladesh can develop meaningful

skills when provided with structured support, patience, acceptance, and opportunities for participation.

His case highlights the importance of:

Early intervention

Lifelong support systems

Family-centered approaches

Vocational preparation

Community inclusion

Dignity-based education

Opportunities for Improving Adult Autism Services in Bangladesh

Expanding Vocational Training

Vocational and employment programs should become a national priority. Skill-based training in areas such as art, digital work, crafts, hospitality, agriculture, and technology could create sustainable opportunities for autistic adults.

Inclusive Employment Policies

Public and private sectors should introduce neurodiversity-friendly hiring policies. Employers need awareness training regarding workplace accommodations and autistic strengths.

Community-Based Adult Services

Bangladesh urgently requires community centers, supported living programs, respite care services, and recreational opportunities for autistic adults.

Professional Training

Teacher training institutions and healthcare systems should strengthen autism-specific professional education. There remains a shortage of trained special educators, occupational therapists, speech therapists, and psychologists.

Family and Mental Health Support

Caregiver burnout is common among families supporting autistic individuals into adulthood. Counseling, peer-support networks, and mental health services are essential components of sustainable care systems.

Conclusion

The journey to adulthood for autistic individuals in Bangladesh remains filled with barriers, uncertainty, and systemic gaps. However, organizations such as [MOONFLOWER Autism Foundation] demonstrate how community-based, parent-led initiatives can create hope and practical opportunities for autistic individuals and their families. Marzook's story reflects both the challenges and possibilities of autism support in Bangladesh. With appropriate education, family involvement, vocational preparation, and inclusive social attitudes, autistic individuals can lead dignified and meaningful lives. Bangladesh now stands at an important moment in its autism journey. Moving beyond awareness toward sustainable adult services, inclusive employment, and community participation will be essential for ensuring that autistic individuals are not left behind after childhood. Building an inclusive society requires collective responsibility from policymakers, educators, healthcare professionals, employers, families, and civil society.