Addressing Autism and Disability:
Making Progress in Bangladesh
In Bangladesh, as in many developing countries, neurodevelopmental disabilities such as Autism are still seen through the lens of misinformation. Dissemination within a community of a modern protocol of autism is complex, multi-factorial challenges, and one that can only be met with scientific evidence. Unfortunately, while most public health officials around the world recognize autism as an emerging if not an already existing crisis, little is being done to address it systematically, including establishing key population-based statistics of prevalence. The lack of data deprives communities the opportunities to formulate and implement evidence-based public health policies that are culturally appropriate and economically feasible.

An intensive analysis of the situation of disability in general and Autism conducted in Bangladesh. It took six months to complete the analysis. This study showed a prevalence of Autism to be 0.84% among Children. Current international trends on Autism reveal 1:87 in the USA and a few studies in Japan, Hong-Kong and Korea show sharply increased figures as high as 1:47. There is no reliable national level estimate of Autism prevalence in Bangladesh to date.

Bangladesh from its very beginning has prioritized the needs of persons with disabilities and was one of the first countries to ratify the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and its optional protocol.

**Focus On Disabilities**

A national policy on disability was developed during 1995 and in 1999 Bangladesh government created the semi-autonomous National Foundation for Development of the Disabled Persons (JatioProtibondhiUnnayan Foundation or JPUF). Disability issues received significant impetus through the Bangladesh Persons with Disability Welfare Act 2001 and an inter-ministerial task force in 2001 which helped in formulating comprehensive policies and services in the community. It also covered the ground for NGOs to develop innovative strategies for service delivery and the opportunity to conduct research.

Currently the Ministry provides aids, grants and allowances for the disable elderly, orphans victims of violence and natural and industrial disasters. It runs rehabilitation, educational and employment programmes. In addition JPUF provides free therapy and counselling; runs one stop service centres, provides mobility devices hearing aids, and maintains a library of resources, like Braille books, internet access, and develops and engages in information dissemination activities.
Leading The Way In Autism Awareness

In 2011, the government of Bangladesh made significant impact in addressing the social stigma making the issue of complex disorders like autism a national priority. From 2011-2012 a comprehensive awareness campaign, parent and professional training and a situation analysis was conducted with the help of Autism Specks and the WHO through the Global Autism Public Health Initiative.

As a result, a unique model to address the challenges for neuro-developmental disabilities was implemented. Bangladesh formed a National Steering Committee for Neurodevelopmental Disorders, comprised of 8 relevant ministries and other stakeholders whose activities are guided by an advisory and technical committee composed of experts, parents and other stakeholders.

The Steering committee is responsible for identifying the challenges and formulating convergent and strategic action plans on Neuro Developmental Disorder (NDD) that can be implemented based on existing resources. Through this process other ministries who were hitherto unaware of the needs of persons with disabilities, have become better engaged and significantly more supportive. This process has also enabled greater collaboration between the government and NGO's and INGO's like Center for Development and Disability (CDD), Action on Disability and development (ADD), Bangladesh Protibondhi Foundation (BUF), Centre for the Rehabilitation of the Paralyzed (CRP), Save The Children, World Vision Bangladesh, UNICEFetc.

In the last 5 years, using autism as a primary focus, Bangladesh has developed effective international partnerships to raise awareness and build capacity and included disability specific information in teacher training manuals, secondary school text books, and training programs of medical students. Disability has played a significant role in the national budget and national development plan.

Recent Achievements

2013 and 2014 has been a remarkable year for disability efforts in Bangladesh. Government made two laws: National Trust Act for Neurodevelopmental Disabilities 2013 and Disabled Persons Right and Security Act 2013. Two national level survey projects have also been conducted: one was a door to door survey for all disabilities conducted by MOSW and the second, a pilot screening project for developmental disorders in children through the community health clinics.

In addition, National Foundation for Development of the Disabled Person (JPUR) was raised to the level of department. In addition, internationally, Bangladesh has played a leading role in initiating and adopting three international resolutions at the UN and WHO bringing greater focus on the needs of those with autism
spectrum disorders. Saima Wazed Hossain, a US licensed school psychologist and the daughter of the current Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, has been a global spokesperson for autism and recently has been appointed as a member on the World Health Organization’s (WHO) Expert Advisory Panel on Mental Health. In the proposed budget for fiscal year 2014-15, special attention has been devoted to people with disabilities.

Role of National Human Rights Commission

National Human Rights Commission Act of Bangladesh has mandated the Commission to inquire into complaints. The primary areas of complaints are Violence against Women, Children, Disabled, and Ethnic Communities etc. Commission also monitor facilities for the Autistic Person within employment, provisions of goods and services and education. For the large majority of cases, there is a settlement reached through a conciliation procedure. The decisions of Commission in cases of discrimination are not binding but it is considered that they have had practical results for the enforcement and strengthening of the law.

The Higher Court may request the Commission to act as amicus curiae (friend of court) in court proceedings including disability discrimination issues. The role as amicus curiae allows the Commission to present views on the interpretation of the law and how it should be applied in the particular situation. Commission intervention in such violence including discrimination against person with disabilities are being highly appreciated in the society.

Public inquiries are used to enable broad participation. They are conducted on the Commission’s own initiative, on exemption applications, at the request of the Attorney-General, or in response to selected complaints raising systematic issues. Public inquiries have been held, for example, on Medicare benefits for psychiatric services. The Commission views the public inquiry procedure as an important way of enhancing prospects for an agreed resolution on specific issues, since it makes sure to gather a wide range of perspectives and actors.

NHRC also addressed the issue of discrimination against disability in its 1st 5 years Strategic Plan (2010-2015). BNHRC in collaboration with Govt., NGO, and INGOs are working for awareness creation among the stakeholders and providing service to the Autistic Persons in particular the Autistic children. Since BHNRC has given priority on Autism, it has been very successfully conducting it activities and resolving by forming a Thematic Committee. Ensuring rights of the disable person will also be one of the priority areas for the 2nd strategic plan (2015-18). In this
regard BNHRC’s vision “Bangladesh will be a country where the dignity of every person with a disability is respected and where laws and policies will comply with the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD)” and that’s the spirit of the Constitution, the Supreme Law of the Land.

Presented By: Commissioner KaziReazulHaque-

Chair
- Child Rights Committee
- Business & Human Rights Committee
- Migrant Workers Welfare Committee

National Human Rights Commission, Bangladesh