

POSTDATA

INTERVIEW

**SAIMAWAZED  
HOSSAIN**

Advocate for autism

I was born in Bangladesh 45 years ago, I am a daughter of the prime minister of my country, Sheikh Hasina, and I studied School Psychology at Barry University. In 2017, I was designated WHO champion for autism in the South-East Asia Region, for making significant contributions to the autism study.

**“At present, we speak about autism differently”**



Presides the Shuchona Foundation that try to insert people with disabilities in society.

By Renzo Giner Vásquez

**Saima Wazed** is one of the main spokeswomen about autism in Bangladesh and the South-East Region.

She organized the first conference on autism in the region in 2011, presides over the National Advisory Committee on Neurodevelopmental Disorders and Autism, and received 'International Champion Award' last year in New York for her contributions to this field.

Last week she visited the Ann Sullivan Center in Lima, Peru, to know about its teaching procedures and try to put them into practice in her country.

### **What makes these teaching procedures interesting to you?**

Well, when people receive a diagnosis of autism, they tend to be isolated. Physicians tell parents that their children will not attend school because they cannot learn. In CASP, people with different ability prove to us that they can receive a high-quality education, that they can learn and work. These students show that autism is only an inability to learn using traditional methods. It is necessary that we change the teaching procedure we use for one working for our students. We want to take the CASP teaching procedure to Bangladesh, to the South-East Asia Region.

### **Help me understand, how you have become a worldwide champion of autism?**

In fact, I don't know either. My mother had a journalist friend who, what a coincidence, had a son with autism. Knowing that I was a school psychologist, she asked me to write an article about this topic. I accepted to do it. This article awakened people's curiosity because a Bangladesh newspaper published it for the first time in my country. I mean, in positive terms.

After this publication, several NGO and schools asked me to speak about this topic in front of 20 or 30 people. Then, I didn't like to speak in public, but it was a funny thing because they waited for a great speech. But, in reality, I was shocked to hear a story...

### **Which one?**

A mother told that she had taken her 13-year-old daughter to the hospital for a stomach pain, but when the physician realized that she had autism, he refused to

treat her. They both spent 8 hours in the hospital without receiving medical care because physicians didn't know how to treat a girl with autism. She was taken to another hospital but died in front of an elevator waiting for someone to take care of her. It was shocking to me.

### **-Terrible...**

After that, I felt I couldn't say anything to those people. Compared to what they had lived, I had to learn from them. Although it may seem incredible, in full 2009 or 2010, parents didn't inform the physicians that their children had autism for fear of not being helped. I think I got deeply involved with the subject at that time.

### **Was that moment the trigger of your work?**

Yes, I placed much pressure on the subject and made sure everyone heard about it. I felt that things had to change. Back then, the Minister of Education, whom I had known since I was a child, could not attend an event organized by the UN. He insisted that I went to the event. And he assured me that I wouldn't give any kind of speech, so I accepted [laughs]. When I heard them speaking about autism and the necessary changes in the health sector about this condition, I liked the speech. It was something we needed in my country.

**“ The person is usually isolated when is diagnosed with autism. Here, students with different abilities show that they can study, learn and work.”**

**“It was incredible that up to 2009, in Bangladesh, parents didn't inform doctors that their children had autism because they did not take care of them.”**

### **What were they talking about?**

Experts talked about identifying autism and the intervention that was needed. I, as a school psychologist, knew that these changes should be applied in the education sector as well. In my country, the Ministry of Welfare is responsible for disabled. He tries to help them for pity, but not to empower them.

### **Is it the biggest problem?**

Yes, because it discourages us from accepting people with different abilities, because it does not give us the chance to empower those people and make them independent. Although we should be sensitive toward these people, we must get rid of this idea of charity. Pity makes us see them as people who do less than the rest, and that's the biggest problem.

**Furthermore, in another interview you spoke of social pressure, we want everyone to be equal.**

That's right! You don't value the differences. For example, in the U. S., people with autism receive educational assistance, but this idea does not center on accepting their autistic characteristics as strengths. In my job, I have come across many autistic people who have many skills and talents, but because they communicate differently than us, we don't accept them. It's incredible! We understand our pets, even though they don't speak our language. We tolerate their inappropriate behaviors, but we are not able to accept other human beings.

**On a global scale, what actions are being taken?**

I think there is greater knowledge about autism. Since 2010, every year, I go to the World Autism Awareness Day to participate in the different panels. This year, for the first time, I felt some relief because we talk about autism differently. And that's a very positive sign.

**In what way?**

Before, we spoke about autism in medical terms. Now, we pay attention to people's stories and talk about their needs. Changes take shapes in this way. An expert can say a lot of things, but when professionals on the autism spectrum talk about their accomplishments, people realize it. This kind of voices should sound louder. We no longer talk about treatment for autism in panels, but about people with autism who deserve the same rights as us. This year, for the first time, I felt I had to attend these panels because the message had transcended.