How Maria turned personal pain into mental health advocacy

Growing up in a turbulent environment and witnessing first-hand her own mother's struggle against stigma and adversity, Maria's journey is a compelling narrative of bravery, resilience, and hope. From the runways of Miss Universe Bangladesh to the Head Offices of Moshal, Maria has clawed her way through a rigid society, claiming a space exactly where she deserves — right at the top!

The beginning of everything

Despite coming from affluent roots, Maria's mother faced ostracism from her own next of kin, simply for choosing to leave an abusive relationship. Hoping to start a new chapter of life, she moved to London with a three-year-old Maria in tow.

"But she fell in love there once again," shared Maria. "And against her good judgment, she decided to go back to Bangladesh for the man who was showing her dreams of a better life."

In an unfortunate twist of fate, however, Maria and her mother were left stranded by the very person they were hoping would be their saviour. A five-year-old Maria remembers her mother helplessly crying for help, unsure of what to do next.

"A lady took us in," reminisces Maria. "I remember entering a big house with many rooms. Inhabiting these rooms were many other ladies. We were given the last corner of the house, and the other women were told not to come near us."

Maria's childhood experiences were shaping her, but they were also chipping away at her mentally. She was smart enough to realise that she would have to work hard from an early age to keep a roof over her head — and she took up all kinds of jobs to do that. She assisted her teacher, worked at a supermarket in Dhaka as part of the sales force, anchored for embassies and even acted! What she did not know was that having to be strong from such a young age would result in burnout, too heavy, too early.

How it came crashing

"In 2017, when I was in 9th grade, I began to experience excruciating pains in my stomach," shares Maria. "The doctors called it ulcers, and I was heavily medicated for a while, but there was no improvement." Over time, this pain caused her to vomit and even faint in school. "It affected my studies and my work," she noted. "I was so desperate to get better, I even tried contacting my estranged father, who, of course, wanted nothing to do with a girl child." As a result of her unexplained illness, Maria failed all her pre-test exams at Rajuk.

This was a huge shock to Maria. She was not able to accept that someone who was used to topping her class could finish her exams so miserably. "I had always been a fighter, but at that point, I had stopped fighting."

Maria remembers the next few days in minute detail. "Three or four scenarios played in my head like a movie. I felt the presence of some people in my room who would harm me if I so much as flinched. I saw my room stretching longer and longer, and at times, I saw it red with blood."

When she finally moved, she felt like the people in the room had engulfed her, and she fainted. Upon regaining her senses, she knew something was very wrong with her. She called a friend who called another friend, a psychology student, luckily, and together they made sense of her condition.

"Clinical depression! Somatoform!" she exclaims. "I was so young, but here I was, spiralling down a path of darkness, and I didn't even understand the jargon!" They also informed her that she was actively hallucinating due to a lack of sleep.

Turning adversity into advocacy

The more Maria read up on psychology, the more interested she became. "I decided I did not want to be in Rajuk anymore, and chose to go for A Levels and psychology instead. Her stomach aches started making sense to her. She began understanding the student suicides taking place around her. The gaps in mental health support in her own country became more apparent, too.

"I found out that in Bangladesh, we have one psychologist for every 2,60,000