



CONTINUED FROM PAGE 4

patients. Can you believe that?" exclaimed Maria. "I realised how lucky I was to have found help the way I did. Had the other suicide victims I knew received the help they needed in time, they would be alive now."

Maria's own experiences, marked by struggle and resilience, ignited her passion for change.

During her first year of A Levels, Maria, already known through her acting gigs, was encouraged by a friend to participate in the Miss Universe beauty pageant for Bangladesh. She quickly realised that winning this pageant could offer her a bigger platform to talk about her real passion — mental health and psychological wellbeing.

Confident to the core, Maria went on to become a 4th runner up at the beauty contest, and the next

How Maria turned personal pain into mental health advocacy

thing she did was jump into social work. Harnessing her experiences of mental distress and recovery, she decided to use her newfound fame to become an advocate for mental health. She started a seminar on suicidal ideation and parenting styles with just 25 people and 2 psychologists, in a small room. This turned into 300 parents, teachers and students all across Dhaka schools.

"This was Moshal's inauguration event!" she exclaims.

Moshal

Moshal started in 2020, with only two psychologists. Maria

had studied international service standards and was offering streamlined services to her clients; the results were phenomenal.

Five years down, Moshal now has 36 psychologists and psychiatrists around the world, such as the USA, Canada, Oman, Australia, and Bangladesh, serving both national and international clients. It has served more than 5,000 clients and impacted 3.5 million people. It has reached out to crowds of 60,000 with seminars and webinars, and has 35 campaigns under it.

A year after its conception, Moshal received the Diana Award. It was the first mental health organisation to win this award, and Maria was the youngest person to hold it. "It has been quite a journey," she agrees, gratefully. "I was the CEO Moshal initially, and right now, I remain as a founding President on its board. We are one of the leading mental health institutions in the country."

Moshal operates both online and offline. Their office has two psychologists, but they also actively send clients to psychologists' personal chambers. "Most of our clients are online, as Moshal is the only mental health organisation in Bangladesh that is operating with international psychologists. And that is one of our biggest strengths," mentions Maria.

International psychologists under Moshal have studied abroad, are established there, and many belong to the Bangladeshi diaspora. "A service that would cost you \$200 to \$300 outside Bangladesh can be availed from Moshal for as little as BDT 1500 to 2000."

Moshal also has an initiative called Pashe Achi, which runs from 6 PM to 2 AM. "It is not an emergency hotline, but it is a non-judgmental friend in need — a physical person who listens to you when no one else will." These thirty-to-forty-minute calls are operated by trained psychology graduates who have been supervised by

Moshal professionals. "Psychologists cannot give instant service, but these students can. Pashe Achi has received a great response."

On the horizon

"Upscaling Moshal is now the plan," shares Maria. "The model is completely manual, so we want to automate it so that it can become as accessible, as affordable, and as effective as possible." Maria wishes to offer Moshal's services to diasporic communities. "We have a huge pool of international psychologists, so we want to give services to Bangladeshis here and to the Bangladeshi community abroad, including students who cannot afford mainstream services abroad."

As Maria nears her 25th birthday, she envisions a future where mental health is no longer a taboo subject. She aspires to establish a retreat where individuals can learn about mental wellness and develop coping strategies in a supportive environment.

"We are part of the privileged, progressive mentality of Bangladesh, but we comprise not even 1 per cent of the total population of this country. The majority of our people are still not open to concepts of mental well-being."

Maria does not deny that progress has indeed taken place, but she does maintain that it has not been fast enough or standardised. "There have to be more structural changes. Our government needs to pass laws on this, and educational institutions need to hold workshops in schools and universities. Micro changes need to happen within families, with parents," urges Maria. "Organisations like ours cannot work alone."

Maria feels that the taboo around mental health will be removed when it is recognised by the government as a national concern. "There are centuries of work left for us to do."

By Munira Fidai
Photo: Sourav Kabir

