



## Letter to the Editor

## Decriminalizing suicide in Bangladesh

Norms, values, and ethics are time-dependent, culturally specific and dynamic. They vary from country to country or even in the same country and from century to century (Cooter, 2004). Suicide is the leading cause of death among young women (15–29 year) in Bangladesh (Salam et al., 2017). However, it is stigmatized, neglected and considered a criminal offense according to section 309 of the Penal Code “Whoever attempts to commit suicide and does any act towards the commission of such offense, shall be punished with simple imprisonment for a term which may extend to one year, or with fine, or with both” (Penal code 1860). It gives police the power to arrest people for attempting suicide and the court can punish. Patients frequently leave the hospital without completing the treatment to avoid the legal proceedings. Moreover, people are afraid of sharing suicide intent or seeking help or admitting previous suicide attempt to avoid social or legal harassments. My inborn religious beliefs, and conservative moral or cultural values hardly give me any scope to ventilate my distress and seek help. I should have the freedom to choose between life and death, and the decision to die by suicide is my right according to Libertarians perspective (Mishara and Weisstub, 2005). My country should not force me to drag a life that has no charm to me against my desire. However, human rights, philosophy, religious beliefs, ethics, and reality hardly stand in the same line. Autonomy is my right; however, my religious beliefs on God's sovereign power over my life and death prevent me from killing myself (Ahaddour et al., 2017). Moreover, the conflict persists between personal autonomy and responsibility to society (Khan and Mian, 2010). Few critics may argue that if there was no religious prohibition or law against suicide, the rate might have been increased. However, we need to keep in mind that “suicide is a matter for treatment and not punishment” (Suryadevara and Tandon, 2018). Moreover, the World Health Organization recommended all countries to review the legal provision of suicide to provide adequate scope to seek help (World Health Organization, 2014). Despite these initiatives, suicide is considered a crime in 21 of the 51 nations in Asia (Tandon and Nathani, 2018). Many researchers consider suicide attempts as a cry for help. When people have no easy scope to express their distress or receive attention, they forced to take alternative pathway. Germany was the first country to decriminalize attempted suicide (Kazarian and Evans, 2001) and most of the developed countries followed. Bangladesh as a part of the Indian Subcontinent inherited the Penal Code Act 1860 at the time of its liberation and this 118-year-old law is the backbone of the legal frame. However, the law is going through modification. In a judgment, the Delhi High Court condemned section 309 as “unworthy of society” (Behere et al., 2017) and following a series of events the section 309 of the Indian Penal Code was deleted on December 10, 2014 from the statute book. Bangladesh can follow the same path. The demand for decriminalization has been raised in other Asian countries. Majeed et al., (2018) recently published a paper with this demand for Pakistan. They considered the decriminalization will provide better access to health care due to the lowered stigma and removal of legal

restriction. Moreover, after the decriminalization of suicide, the rate of suicide reduced in most countries (Kahn and Lester, 2013). Bangladesh has enacted a new law on Mental Health Act-2018 (Mental Health Act, 2018) and it is high time to decriminalize the suicide attempt in Bangladesh. However, we should empower legal authorities to ensure care for people for attempting suicide not to punish. The threat of punishment hardly prevents a person who dares to kill one's own life. The society and the state should provide better support, care and adequate scope for everybody to seek help when they are in distress and discomfort.

## Conflict of interest

None.

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