

Next Generation

Bangladesh

Executive Summary
July 2024





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Foreword

Since 1951, the British Council has been fostering educational and cultural exchanges between Bangladesh and the United Kingdom. For 75 years, guided by our global mission, we have strengthened international links, built connections and facilitated lasting relationships between our two countries. Throughout that time, our work has adapted to challenges and transformations. However, we have consistently held a core objective: to ensure youth voices are heard and understood.

The Next Generation Bangladesh research is part of our global initiative, aimed at exploring and amplifying the perspectives of young people during times of significant change. The programme provides a platform for young people and their views, offering actionable recommendations to combat challenges and their concerns. Bangladesh is experiencing rapid societal and economic shifts. It is more important than ever to listen to the next generation.

The country stands at a pivotal juncture in its history, with the ambition to become a developed nation. Central to these goals is a focus on leveraging technology and innovation for sustainable development. In this context, the role of youth is crucial, serving as a driving force behind the nation's growth trajectory and enabling Bangladesh to capitalize on its demographic dividend.

Next Generation Bangladesh offers many unexpected insights into the attitudes and ambitions of young people. The report is revealing, however. It also offers constructive conclusions and suggestions on the way forward for policy makers and programmers. The research findings showcase the resilience, creativity, and optimism for the future, as young people navigate the path towards an equitable, technologically advanced, and prosperous life in Bangladesh.

Despite their optimism, young people face significant obstacles, with rising unemployment rates, poor teaching quality and limited access to healthcare. Participants cited barriers such as nepotism, hiring discrimination and low wages all of which are pressuring a large percentage of young people to migrate to foreign countries. Education is highly valued as a vehicle for personal advancement but there is a disconnect between the status it holds and the concrete benefits young people are currently experiencing. These barriers prevent young people from reaching their full potential, participating in the nation's growth, and achieving even their most immediate ambitions. Frustrations are evident.

It is no surprise that the survey finds young people are advocating for a more inclusive and sustainable society. Expressing a desire for greater transparency, accountability, and participation in governance and decision-making processes to address reform leads to an emphasis on gender inclusion, social justice and religious tolerance. However, the findings also highlight the risk of the emerging generation being inclined to traditional patriarchal structures if priority action is not taken on reinforcing trends towards greater inclusion.

In the face of current challenges and significant shifts, this research illuminates the innovative potential and aspirations of Bangladesh's young people. As the country navigates its transformative journey, the perspectives of its young population will be instrumental in driving progress. By investing in youth, Bangladesh can achieve its vision of becoming a prosperous, equitable, and technologically advanced nation, setting it on a path for greater prosperity for all its citizens and contributing to broader Indo-Pacific stability and development.

My deepest gratitude to the young people who participated and shared their reflections for this report. We hope that the findings of the study will serve as a powerful instrument for all those who share our commitment to supporting the future of Bangladesh. Our goal is to capture and elevate the voices of young Bangladeshis, ensuring they contribute meaningfully to the national discourse and help shape a future that reflects their dreams and potential.

Stephen Forbes
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British Council

Executive summary

Background to the research

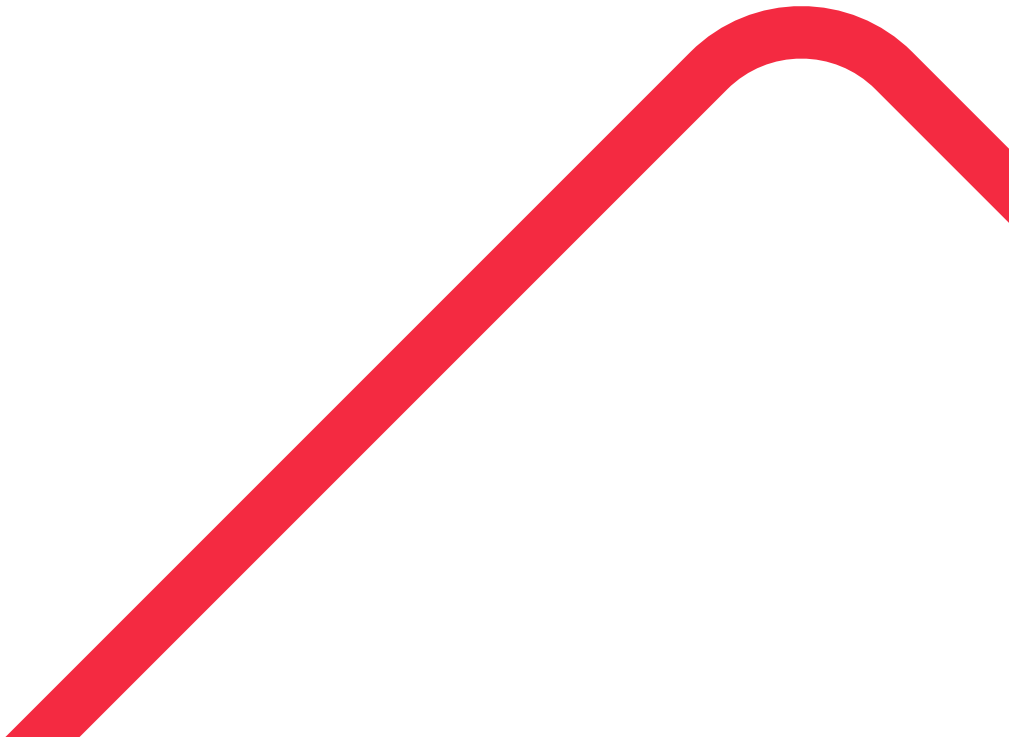
This report explores the experiences, perceptions, and attitudes of young people in Bangladesh as part of the British Council's global Next Generation research programme. We consulted 3,081 people aged 18-35 from diverse backgrounds to ensure the research is representative and provides a holistic snapshot into the Next Generation. The study provides insight into how young people in Bangladesh navigate their daily lives, see their futures, and the condition of their country.

The study included a landscape analysis of existing literature, a nationally representative quantitative survey of 3,000 young people exploring the outlooks, priorities, aspirations, and perceived barriers to success among young people in Bangladesh, and a qualitative deep dive through an online youth community and eight community immersion case studies. The research findings are a result of a mixed-method approach exploring the socio-cultural contexts, attitudes, and aspirations of young people, as part of British Council's Next Generation research programme amplifying youth voice globally.

This research was conducted against the backdrop of the current demographic dividend and Bangladesh's ambition to become an Upper Middle-Income Country by 2031, and a Developed Country by 2041. It aimed to understand young people's views as they navigate this landscape and highlight the issues that matter to them most. M&C Saatchi World Services were commissioned by the British Council to conduct this research with support by local partners and the Youth Task Force.



The research findings are a result of a mixed-method approach exploring the socio-cultural contexts, attitudes, and aspirations of young people, as part of British Council's Next Generation research programme amplifying youth voice globally.



Summary of findings

The youth are balancing collectivist and individualist value systems

Bangladesh marked its 54th Independence Day on 26th March 2024 as a young nation with a rich culture and much to celebrate. Young people share patriotic sentiments by taking pride in both their language (55 per cent) and culture (14 per cent). Likewise, young people uphold values such as tolerance, fairness, and family bonds, reflecting the essence of Bangladeshi culture.¹ Family cohesion (43 per cent) and stable marital relationships (14 per cent) are not only central to their present, but are also perceived as crucial contributors to young people's future happiness and success. Notably, women (67 per cent) view family as pivotal to their well-being, while men are more likely to prioritise financial stability and job satisfaction.

Despite embracing collectivist ideals, young people feel disconnected from societal structures, which they believe hinder personal values including integrity, flexibility, and creativity. Perceptions of a lack of community leadership, with no young people reporting community leaders as the most influential figures, points to a detachment between youth and leadership, connected to dissatisfaction with the lack of recognition of the individual merit and expression of young people. Concerns around the education system failing to nurture creativity and innovation have left young people feeling undervalued, particularly those who want to start a business or follow a less trodden path. This disconnect is particularly the case for young women, who face barriers to public expression of values, such as politics, religious values, and gender, due to patriarchal norms and constraints on female voice.

Despite concerns regarding innovation and creativity, education is highly valued, with three-quarters (75 per cent) believing it drives societal change. However, 62 per cent feel educational achievements are inadequately rewarded by society. Nonetheless, education is seen as integral to success, especially by those from higher social classes and with higher educational attainment. Young people, particularly women in both rural (45 per cent) and urban (55 per cent) areas, believe in the availability of support from their country even without a good education. Rural youth, in general, hold stronger beliefs in available support compared to urban youth. Overall, young people believe that education can empower individuals to tackle pressing issues like unemployment, climate change, and poverty.

To address these concerns, recommendations include enhancing extracurricular activities in secondary education to foster creativity and innovation. This can be done in collaboration with CSOs, youth-led organisations, and government ministries to offer diverse options such as debating, sports, culture, performing arts, and creative industries, alongside academic classes.

¹ Chowdhury, F. Y., & Rojas-Lizana, S. (2020). Family language policies among Bangladeshi migrants in Southeast Queensland, Australia. *International Multilingual Research Journal*. Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.1080/19313152.2020.1846835>.

Increased access to digital media has amplified youth voice

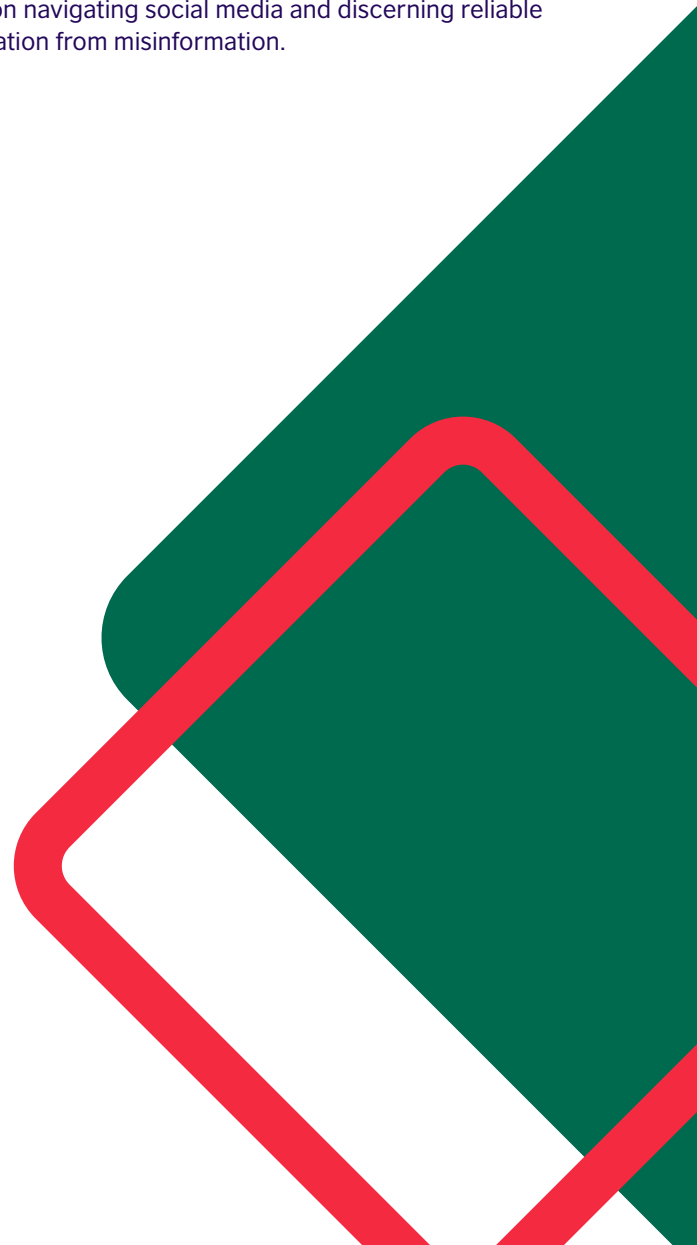
Going digital has become one of the most important trends in Bangladesh in the past decade. A significant majority of young people are active online (66 per cent) and are regular internet users, with a third (33 per cent) remaining non-users. Notably, male respondents (77 per cent) outnumber females (56 per cent) in internet usage, highlighting a noticeable gender gap. In rural areas, this difference between men (79 per cent) and women (53 per cent) is particularly pronounced. This aligns with results from previous research, which stipulates that the gender gap in internet usage does not stem solely from economic disparities but is rather deeply rooted in societal norms.

Social media has become the primary news source for young people (27 per cent), eclipsing traditional media such as television, newspapers, and radio. This shift is reshaping perceptions of media reliability among young people and even reportedly increasing involvement in civic matters. Online presence and social media have seamlessly integrated into youth culture, offering accessibility and perceived transparency. Traditional media outlets are often viewed as biased and sensationalist, prompting the rise of individual-led social media channels that cater to specific communities, disseminate valuable information, and actively engage with the youth.

“Since social media has the advantage of adding one’s own opinion while watching news, it attracts more youth than other public and privately owned media outlets.”
(Male respondent, 18-24, Rangpur, student).

The internet serves as a catalyst for increased political and civic engagement among users, with non-internet users being less likely to be engaged across various political indicators. Young people highlight active participation on social media across various levels as imperative, particularly in addressing climate-related issues.

However, the benefits of social media are not without drawbacks, as the growing trend of excessive online engagement raises concerns about the proliferation of misinformation and the formation of echo chambers, exacerbated by social media algorithms. Online gender-based violence targeting female public figures advocating for women’s rights is also a pervasive issue on social media, exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. This online backlash not only silences women but also hinders gender justice activism. Recommendations to address this issue include comprehensive strategies to safeguard freedom of speech and hold perpetrators of online violence accountable, including evaluating and enhancing existing legal frameworks. Other recommendations include implementing digital literacy programmes in secondary education to foster skills in critical thinking, information evaluation, and online safety. This should focus on navigating social media and discerning reliable information from misinformation.



Discriminatory experiences disproportionately affect women

The Next Generation survey reveals that awareness of discrimination is widespread, with 46 per cent of young people reporting personal experiences of discrimination, primarily based on political beliefs, job status, socio-economic standing, and disability. Gender and sexual orientation-based discrimination also prevail, with urban men more susceptible to political violence. Domestic violence emerges as a prevalent issue, disproportionately affecting women, with 27 per cent of respondents reporting personal experiences, notably highest among women aged 31-35.

Although young people overwhelmingly advocate for positive gender norms for women, entrenched discriminatory attitudes persist, particularly among young men. While over 80 per cent of young people endorse women's rights regarding voting, education, and autonomy over their health decisions, a notable minority still hold discriminatory beliefs. One-third of all respondents (33 per cent) dispute the equality of women and girls with their male counterparts, while 16 per cent reject women's entitlement to work outside the home.

Social class, age, geography, gender, and internet usage significantly shape young people's views on traditional gender norms. Urban upbringing notably influences attitudes towards expected behaviours in the public life of women. Compared to their rural counterparts, young people in urban areas are 30 per cent more likely to support women's voting rights and 22 per cent more inclined to endorse women's autonomy over their health decisions. Young people in Rangpur are the most likely division to hold discriminatory views towards women's freedoms outside the house (25 per cent), including that women should not be able to work outside the house (27 per cent), followed by Chattogram. Young men aged 31-35 are the most likely to report discriminatory perceptions, with 28 per cent disagreeing that women should have the same freedoms as men. These quantitative insights on youth attitudes, particularly among young men, align with recent Gender Social Norm Index 2023 research, which revealed that over 99 per cent of people in Bangladesh harbour at least one bias against women.

The prevalence of discriminatory norms and gender-based violence poses significant obstacles to women's empowerment in Bangladesh.² Despite being more likely to experience gender-based violence, our findings show that there is minimal reporting among women, indicative of broader societal pressures, patriarchal norms, and limited understanding, particularly in conservative or lower-income families. Addressing discriminatory practices is vital for unleashing the full potential of women's contributions to decision-making and professional domains. To that end, the following recommendations have been proposed:

- Review and enhance the Domestic Violence Prevention and Protection Act (DVVPA) to better protect victims and hold perpetrators accountable. Engage stakeholders and consider community outreach, legal aid, shelters, and training for law enforcement and healthcare providers.
- Integrate gender-sensitive education into school curricula to promote equality and empower youth as advocates. Train educators, particularly in regions with high rates of early marriage and gender-based violence.

² UNDP Bangladesh. (2022). *Gender Based Violence: taking stock of Bangladesh's shadow pandemic*. www.undp.org/bangladesh/blog/gender-based-violence-taking-stock-bangladeshs-shadow-pandemic

Optimism for the future, but less than nine years ago

Overall, young people display a hopeful outlook towards the future, including regarding quality of life (54 per cent), local community (50 per cent), country (51 per cent), and the global sphere (50 per cent). Notably, they exhibit the highest degree of optimism concerning their future careers (59 per cent positive versus 24 per cent negative), particularly among young rural women. Conversely, the highest level of pessimism is directed towards 'my country' (29 per cent). Interestingly, respondents from higher income classes are more inclined towards pessimism regarding the country's future, with only four out of ten (40 per cent) reporting optimism.

Despite an overall positive outlook, there has been a notable decline in optimism regarding the nation's future since the Next Generation Bangladesh 2015 study, where 60 per cent of young people believed the country was 'heading in the right direction', compared to 51 per cent in 2023. Young people attribute this waning optimism to several factors. Global economic instability and escalating unemployment rates casts a shadow over prospects for stability and progress. Concerns on how the education system can keep up with the demands of the modern world and concerns about climate change further contributes to a sense of disillusionment.

Despite these challenges, optimism persists, particularly concerning anticipated reforms in the education sector and initiatives to prevent 'brain drain' by supporting youth-led entrepreneurship. There is an overarching sense of hope and confidence in Bangladesh's future development despite hurdles such as unemployment and political instability. Young people express belief in the potential for positive change and progress, driven by government initiatives and collective efforts to address societal issues. This resilience underscores a determination to overcome obstacles and work towards a brighter future for themselves and their country.

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Education is highly valued, but concerns remain in access and alignment with market needs

The education sector in Bangladesh has witnessed significant achievements in the last decade, particularly in expanding access to education, achieving near universal enrolment for primary education. Recognising education's pivotal role in national prosperity, the government is prioritising transformative changes to enhance education quality across all levels. This commitment is underscored by a substantial allocation in the FY2023-24 education budget, focusing on skill-based training, infrastructure enhancements, and support for underprivileged students. Efforts also target comprehensive teacher training, digitalisation of education, and ensuring inclusion of marginalised groups. These priority areas for investment are also echoed as crucial by young people, reflecting a shared vision for a positive future.

There is overarching positivity towards the education system, with six in ten young people (60 per cent) agreed that the 'quality of education is good', and over half agreeing that the quality is improving (53 per cent). This optimism is particularly strong among rural youth, and those aged 18-24. However, there remains a consensus on areas requiring improvement. Young people in Chattogram, Dhaka and Rangpur, and urban areas are particularly concerned about the quality of Bangladesh's education system. Young people's wider concerns revolve around teaching quality (49 per cent), students' attitudes towards studies (16 per cent), curriculum relevance (11 per cent), and resource constraints, all of which are priority areas for the Government of Bangladesh in 2023/2024. Additionally, challenges persist in aligning academic knowledge with market demands for formal employment. Employers in the formal sector report struggling to recruit fresh graduates with practical experience whose academic knowledge meets market requirements. Urban youth (55 per cent) display lower preparedness rates compared to rural youth (64 per cent), highlighting a readiness gap for formal employment prevalent in urban areas.

Promisingly, there is growing support for technical education amongst young people, with two thirds (65 per cent) reporting the greater need for technical education that focuses on specific skills and knowledge related to a particular profession or trade over formal education, aligning with the government's vision. This preference is particularly strong in Barisal, Sylhet, and Rangpur. However, challenges persist in the Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) sector, including low demand and deficiencies in quality and infrastructure. Addressing these challenges are paramount, with a strong emphasis on improving teaching quality and curriculum, despite a generally positive perception of the education system's quality and improvement trajectory. Recommendations to address concerns include:

- Map and address discrepancies in education access across divisions and urban/rural areas, prioritising areas with low educational attainment like Rangpur. Invest in these areas with targeted assistance and implementation plans to improve access.
- Develop comprehensive teacher training programmes focused on modern teaching methodologies and essential soft skills integration, particularly in regions like Chattogram and Dhaka with concerns about teaching quality. Collaborate with the Ministry of Education, Education NGOs, and youth-led organisations to provide workshops, seminars, and ongoing professional development opportunities for teachers.
- Expand access to technical and vocational education programmes, building partnerships with industry leaders, vocational training institutes, and development sector actors. Focus on regions like Dhaka, Khulna, Rangpur, Sylhet, and Barisal where there is a recognised need for TVET. Invest in state-of-the-art equipment and facilities to support practical learning experiences.

Youth is open to international migration to address their economic concerns

Young people are career-focused, with two-thirds agreeing (65 per cent) that it is more important to pursue a career than to complete education. However, unemployment emerges as the foremost global concern for young people (42 per cent), with education seen as the solution (69 per cent).

The issue of NEET (Not in Education, Employment, or Training) youth is a significant concern in the country, with a stark gender discrepancy, as 62 per cent of women are NEET, compared to 19 per cent of men. The overall NEET population is also rising, standing at 41 per cent of young people in 2022, increased from around 30 per cent in 2017.³ The primary barriers to employment identified by NEET youth include corruption/nepotism (37 per cent), discrimination in hiring practices (20 per cent), and balancing family life and employment (18 per cent). These concerns are particularly pronounced among urban youth, with 46 per cent citing corruption/nepotism and 25 per cent highlighting discrimination. In contrast, rural NEET youth are more likely to report familial-related barriers. Gender dynamics also play a significant role, with societal expectations often leading young women into NEET status through early marriage and household responsibilities. Balancing family life and employment is especially challenging for rural NEET women, with 17 per cent citing it as a significant barrier. Whilst societal pressures exclude young women from the workforce, qualitative insights suggest social pressure driving young men to excel in careers are leading to mental health issues and NEET status. In response to limited job opportunities, many young people are turning to social media and digital freelancing to develop skills and seek employment.

Despite the overarching concern of unemployment, those who are employed still face significant challenges. Low wages are a major issue, cited by six in ten (60 per cent) young people, particularly affecting young men, with 69 per cent reporting it as their main challenge. This concern is especially prevalent in Khulna and Rangpur, where over two-thirds (67 per cent) identify low wages as the primary concern. Additionally, long working hours are a notable challenge for 47 per cent of respondents. The prevalence of informal employment, particularly in rural areas, exacerbates these challenges, with opportunities for formal, higher-paid employment remaining scarce. In regions like Rangpur, where agricultural opportunities dominate, the lack of suitable job opportunities is pronounced, contributing to a perceived lack of career growth and development, reported by 13 per cent of young people in Rangpur. These challenges are also gendered, with young women more likely to report issues such as long working hours, sexual harassment, corruption, and mistreatment compared to young men.

³ Bangladesh Bureau Statistics. (2023). *Labour Force Survey 2022*. <https://bbs.gov.bd/site/page/labourforcesurvey2022>

Despite a largely informal job market, digitisation and international integration is driving an evolving business landscape. Labour market experts emphasise the growing demand for graduates with proficient communication skills, particularly in English and presentation, essential for navigating global commerce. Young people themselves recognise the importance of soft skills, with communication ranking highest in importance (28 per cent), especially among Master's degree holders (40 per cent) and young men (30 per cent). As Bangladesh's economy becomes more globalised, effective communication across cultural divides is crucial for professionals. However, despite 79 per cent acknowledging its importance, only five per cent of young people report fluency in English. Presentation skills are also vital for leaving a lasting impact in local and global business contexts, highlighting the need for comprehensive skill development among young people and NEET youth. As such, recommendations include:

- Foster partnerships between educational institutions and the private sector to offer long-term internship programmes, focusing on young people aged 18-24 to address the lack of previous experience as a barrier to employment.
- Expand and replicate freelancing training programmes to empower young people and women specifically with skills for freelancing, such as content writing and website design.
- Implement gender-responsive employment policies through cross-collaborative efforts between government ministries, CSOs, NGOs, and private sector industries to address barriers faced by young women, including social stigma and family responsibilities.
- Integrate employability skills into English language courses offered by organisations like the British Council to better prepare students for the job market, including modules on resume writing, interview skills, and workplace communication.
- Promote virtual exchange programmes to connect young people globally, facilitating collaborative projects, discussions, and cultural activities across borders, particularly in subjects like international relations and economics.
- Invest in practical training for in-demand tech skills through partnerships with growing industries like IT, IoT, AI and e-commerce, scaling up existing initiatives focusing on skills development.
- Include mental health support and systemic well-being in NEET youth support packages, offering accessible mental health services, community-based programmes, peer support networks, financial assistance, specialised training for professionals, and public awareness campaigns to destigmatise mental health issues.

Youth is disengaged but not apathetic

High levels of disengagement with politics among two-thirds (65 per cent) of young people stem from distrust and a lack of representation, with over half (58 per cent) expressing little to no trust in the political system. This disengagement with politics intersects with gender, employment status, educational attainment, and region, although there is little difference between rural and urban demographics. Young women, young people with lower educational attainment, and young people residing in Rajshahi and Khulna are the most likely to be disengaged, contrasting with Barisal, where engagement is more pronounced. Almost eight in ten (79 per cent) young women reported being very disengaged, compared to just over half (51 per cent) of young men.

Concerns about corruption (75 per cent) drive distrust in the system, compounded by fears of reprisal for political involvement (six per cent), particularly on employment opportunities. Additionally, one-third (33 per cent) feel ignored in decision-making processes. Despite these high levels of distrust and disengagement regarding politics, this is not discouraging political action and young people are committed to Bangladesh's future. Just under three-quarters (72 per cent) intended to vote in the 2024 January election, reflecting a desire for meaningful political participation. A significant portion of young people who reported being disengaged with politics generally, believe it is important to be engaged with politics at the global (39 per cent), national (49 per cent), regional (47 per cent), and local level (62 per cent). This challenges the notion that political disengagement among youth stems from apathy or disinterest, but rather barriers exist that hinder their ability to participate meaningfully in the political process. Initiatives like college-based forums foster dialogue, while informal engagement, such as discussing politics with peers (24 per cent), showcases a commitment to local change. Concerns about voting mainly revolve around security (12 per cent), political dissatisfaction (ten per cent), or uncertainty about party choice (ten per cent), with only a minority (19 per cent) citing apathy.

Encouraging meaningful youth involvement in decision-making processes would validate their engagement and strengthen their sense of political empowerment. A notable finding from the qualitative research was that making political engagement more accessible, by addressing barriers and acknowledging the contributions of younger generations, could enhance youth participation in national politics. Proposed reforms include lowering the voting age, providing transportation assistance, creating psychologically safe voting environments, and the following:

- Integrate civic education into school curricula at secondary and higher education levels to equip young people with knowledge and skills for active citizenship, including critical thinking and legal knowledge for initiating change.
- Develop a digital Ethical Code and guidelines to protect freedom of expression and reduce online harassment, aligning with objectives of the National Youth Action Plan for constructive social participation.
- Foster genuine interaction between local leaders and youth by demonstrating sincere interest in youth issues and involving them in community matters, amplifying successful case studies of effective community leadership.
- Utilise popular social media platforms like Facebook, YouTube, and TikTok to simplify political information, facilitate discussions, and engage young people on relevant issues, organising virtual town halls, webinars, and online forums for connecting with leaders and peers.

A gap between awareness versus action on climate change concerns

Bangladesh is the 7th most climate vulnerable country in the world,⁴ and grapples with various climate change challenges such as heat stress, drought, sea level rise, and an upsurge in natural disasters.⁵ These challenges disproportionately affect impoverished and vulnerable communities, with projections suggesting that by 2050, one in seven people in Bangladesh will be displaced due to climate change.^{6,7} While the Next Generation survey indicates that approximately six in ten young people are concerned about climate change, only five per cent view it as the most pressing global issue.

A recent UNICEF study focusing on young people in Bangladesh revealed that half of the respondents aged 15-24 struggled to articulate climate change or global warming concepts. A similar finding was reported in the 2015 British Council Next Generation report on Bangladesh, which revealed that young people in the country did not perceive themselves as directly impacted by climate change, often associating climate issues more with health concerns. This sentiment was echoed in qualitative discussions, where participants acknowledged low awareness of the consequences and risks associated with climate change and its link to global warming. This underscores the urgent need for education and awareness initiatives to enlighten young people about the gravity of climate change and motivate them to adopt sustainable actions. Interestingly, just under three-quarters of upper-class respondents expressed concern about climate change, compared to approximately two-thirds of middle- and lower-class respondents.

Understanding the diverse range of climate attitudes and behaviours among young people is essential to enhance their involvement and impact in climate action. Whilst most young people (69 per cent) had engaged in a climate related activity in the last 12 months, this was to varying degrees. Climate action can largely be classified as into physical, active actions, and more informal awareness raising activities. Based on a segmentation analysis, young people can be categorised into four segments based on their

climate attitudes and behaviours: 'Optimistic Climate Activists' (15 per cent), 'Climate Advocates' (40 per cent), 'Climate Anxious Pessimists' (seven per cent), and the 'Climate Indifferent' (39 per cent). These segments exhibit varying degrees of engagement and action towards climate change, reflecting a spectrum from high engagement and action to indifference. Strong correlations were observed between climate engagement, political engagement, and optimism for the future, painting a picture of interconnectedness between environmental awareness, civic participation, and hopeful outlooks toward upcoming challenges and opportunities. Based on this, recommendations include to:

- Integrate climate change education into school curricula and offer vocational training programmes on green technology to reach a wide audience of young people, collaborating with government agencies, NGOs, and private sector entities, particularly in regions like Barisal and Khulna where concerns about climate change are highest.
- Create tailored strategies to engage different segments of young people effectively, focusing on the 'Climate Indifferent' segment with significant civic engagement. Offer tailored education and awareness resources, practical solutions, local impact illustrations, and value-aligned framing of climate action in collaboration with youth organisations, NGOs, CSOs, and the Government.

⁴ German Watch. (2021). Global Climate Risk Index. <https://www.germanwatch.org/en/cri>

⁵ British High Commission Dhaka. (2023). 'Bangladesh-UK Accord on Climate Change. www.gov.uk/government/news/bangladesh-uk-accord-on-climate-change

⁶ The World Bank. (2022). Urgent Climate Action crucial for Bangladesh to sustain Strong Growth. www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2022/10/31/urgent-climate-action-crucial-for-bangladesh-to-sustain-strong-growth

⁷ The Climate Reality Project. (2021). How the Climate Crisis is impacting Bangladesh. www.climaterealityproject.org/blog/how-climate-crisis-impacting-bangladesh

A challenging job market has fostered an appetite for entrepreneurialism

Entrepreneurship emerges as a promising path for empowering youth and fostering economic development in Bangladesh. One notable advantage of entrepreneurship is its perceived integrity and lower susceptibility to corruption compared to conventional employment routes, offering an alternative avenue for young people. Social media and the internet also emerge as catalysts for entrepreneurial opportunities. Approximately 44 per cent of young individuals express interest in launching their own businesses within the next five years. However, interest in entrepreneurship varies based on gender and social class. Only 35 per cent of young women are interested in entrepreneurship, compared to 54 per cent of young men. Moreover, individuals from higher social classes display significantly greater enthusiasm for starting businesses compared to their counterparts from middle and lower classes.

The primary obstacle hindering both urban and rural young women from pursuing entrepreneurial ventures is access to finance (35 per cent), coupled with a lack of skills and experience (33 per cent). In contrast, over half of young men identify insufficient skills and experience (55 per cent in urban areas; 51 per cent in rural areas) as their main challenge. Family pressure to pursue traditional careers, typically in government or private sectors, also poses a significant hurdle highlighted by respondents. Despite governmental efforts to support entrepreneurship through financial incentives and simplified registration processes, entrenched patriarchal norms and societal expectations continue to impede women's entrepreneurial aspirations.⁸ Shockingly, only 4.5 per cent of businesses in Bangladesh are owned by women, despite their comprising 92 per cent of the informal workforce.⁹

During key informant interviews with market experts, they also underscored challenges faced by young entrepreneurs, particularly in accessing markets and supply chains dominated by large corporations in the physical sector. However, the digital economy presents promising opportunities, with youth entrepreneurship thriving online. To promote youth entrepreneurship and address gender disparities, policymakers must adopt youth-centric and gender-sensitive strategies. This entails revising policies to bolster small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), enhancing digital literacy, and facilitating access to finance and mentorship for aspiring entrepreneurs. Collaborative efforts between the government, private sector, and civil society are paramount to creating a supportive ecosystem conducive to the success of all aspiring entrepreneurs, including to:

- Tailor financial support initiatives for young entrepreneurs, especially women, by creating dedicated funds or grant programmes and offering preferential loan terms from financial institutions.
- Cultivate family and community support networks for youth entrepreneurship, particularly in rural areas, through awareness programmes, workshops, and mentorship opportunities.
- Develop interventions to address socioeconomic barriers to entrepreneurship, providing financial support, training, and mentorship tailored to aspiring entrepreneurs from disadvantaged backgrounds.
- Facilitate youth entrepreneurship in the digital economy by investing in digital literacy programmes, infrastructure development, and access to digital platforms and e-commerce channels.
- Design policies to support Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (SMEs) growth, including tax incentives, regulatory reforms, and access to finance, in collaboration with industry experts and stakeholders.

⁸ Sarker, A. (2023, January 31). *The Barriers to Becoming a Woman Entrepreneur in Bangladesh*. Atlantic Fellows. <https://afsee.atlanticfellows.lse.ac.uk/en-gb/blogs/the-barriers-to-becoming-a-woman-entrepreneur-in-bangladesh>

⁹ Rupa, U. F. (2023, July 31). *Behind the Success of Female Education in Bangladesh*. The Confluence. <https://theconfluence.blog/behind-the-success-of-female-education-in-bangladesh/>

Developments in digital skills and literacy presents a crucial opportunity for young people

In today's increasingly digital world, digital literacy and skills are crucial for accessing employment opportunities. Three significant opportunities emerge from this digitisation wave: freelancing, breaking gender barriers in entrepreneurship, and enhancing political engagement. However, challenges such as lack of guidance, gender disparities, and missing safe online spaces must be addressed.

Bangladesh has the world's second largest freelancer workforce, servicing foreign companies, and ranking among the top countries preferred by employers. The potential of freelancing as an opportunity for young people emerged as a key pathway but there is a lack of knowledge on how to pursue this career. The lack of guidance on entering the freelancing industry emphasises the need for mentorship programmes within educational and professional networks. Freelancing also presents a unique opportunity for women, offering flexibility and acceptance, especially post-marriage. Yet challenges for young women persist, including limited training for online jobs, hindering full participation.

The digital landscape in Bangladesh is rapidly changing, offering opportunities and challenges for young people. This is especially the case for young women, who increasingly recognise the importance of digital proficiency. Nearly a third of urban women emphasise its necessity for employment (32 per cent), a sentiment echoed more strongly among women than men. Digitisation can also alleviate gendered barriers in entrepreneurship, offering women low-cost opportunities to establish online businesses through social media platforms. However, limited digital marketing knowledge and skills hinder sustainable business growth, alongside trust issues due to unethical practices.

Another key opportunity offered by increased digitisation is its ability to facilitate political engagement, empowering young voices through social media platforms. Young people see social media's potential to enable meaningful dialogue, collective

action and ultimately empower young people in politics. However, young people highlight the need for technology-driven infrastructure and safe spaces to have a meaningful dialogue with community leaders. Young individuals have exhibited a commendable level of awareness and engagement with e-government services, which is a good sign as Bangladesh is looking into a future that should be characterised by efficiency, digitisation, and end-to-end operable citizen-centric e-govt. services. Notably, more than half of the respondents demonstrated awareness of the launch of these services, with the highest levels observed among the 18-24 age group (58 per cent), followed closely by the 25-30 age bracket (56 per cent), and 31-35-year-olds (52 per cent). Furthermore, individuals with higher levels of education were more likely to be aware of e-government services. Interestingly, factors such as internet usage and geographical location had relatively minor impacts on respondents' awareness of these services.

Recommendations to leverage digitisation as a catalyst for youth empowerment and economic growth include to:

- Facilitate youth entrepreneurship in the digital economy by investing in digital literacy programmes and infrastructure development, enabling access to digital platforms and e-commerce channels.
- Expand digital infrastructure in rural areas, particularly in regions with low internet usage, by subsidising IT services, expanding 4G mobile coverage, and providing public internet facilities.
- Ensure equitable access to internet usage in digital literacy and ICT programmes, considering regional disparities in internet access and educational attainment.
- Launch targeted programmes to bridge the gender gap in technology access and usage, focusing on increasing technological access among females in rural areas and ensuring equal opportunities for all young people.



Image: Community leader in Dhaka, Innovative Research and Consultancy 2024



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