

Next Generation

Bangladesh

July 2024





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Authors: Aibek Iliasov, Ana Babic and Artur Borkowski.

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Contents

Foreword	4
Executive summary	5
Background to the research	5
Summary of findings.....	6
Introduction	18
Methodology and analytical framework	20
1. Perceptions	36
1.1. Demographic profiles.....	36
1.2. Youth beliefs and values	38
1.3. Online presence of young people.....	43
1.4. Digital discourse and media influence.....	46
1.5. Youth views and voices on society.....	49
1.6. Youth challenges	56
1.7. Aspirations and the future	62
2. Pathways	76
2.1. Education.....	76
2.2. Employment.....	85
2.3. International migration	90
2.4. Youth voice in the community.....	97
2.5. Youth voice in political engagement.....	98
2.6. Youth voice in climate action.....	105
3. Potential	120
3.1. Career readiness: soft skills and cultural relations.....	120
3.2. Entrepreneurship	125
3.3. Digitalisation and digital literacy: focusing on the future	128
3.4. Enablers for empowerment: The potential of education.....	133
4. Conclusion and policy recommendations	136
Reference list	145
Annexure	148
Annex 1. Sample breakdown.....	148
Annex 2. Deep dives.....	149
Annex 3. Case studies.....	158
Acknowledgements	174



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
Country Director, Bangladesh
British Council

Executive summary

Background to the research

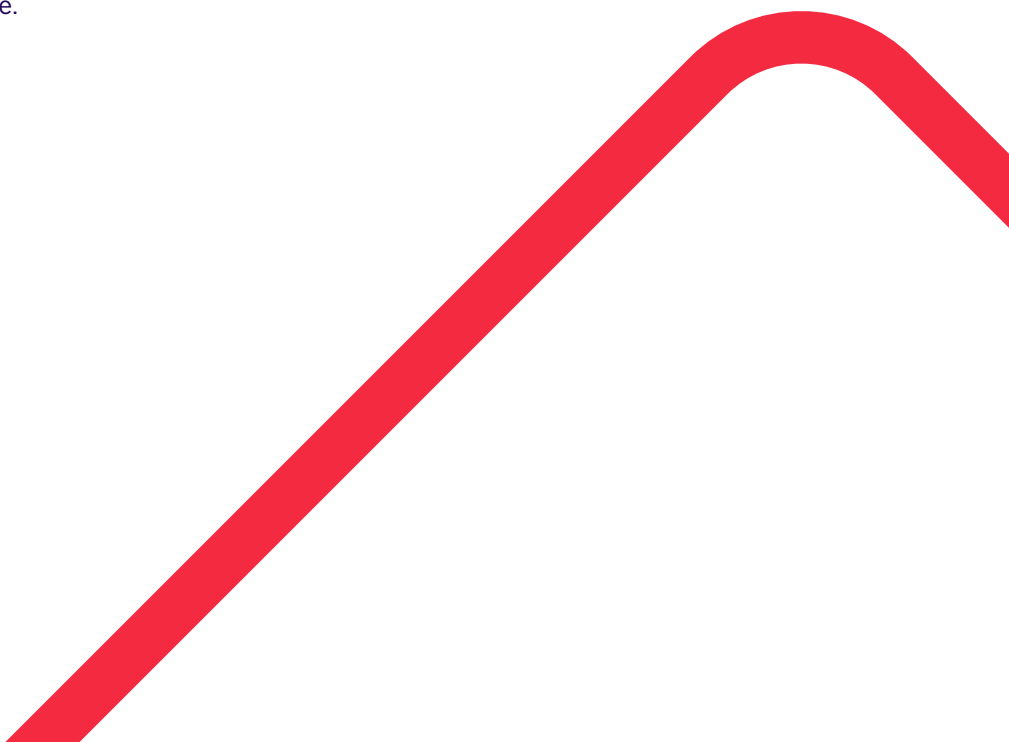
This report explores the experiences, perceptions, and attitudes of young people in Bangladesh as part of the British Council's global Next Generation research programme. We consulted 3,081 people aged 18-35 from diverse backgrounds to ensure the research is representative and provides a holistic snapshot 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.

It is important to acknowledge that this research was conducted before the July uprising against the backdrop of the current demographic dividend and Bangladesh's ambition persisting ambition for national social and economic growth. 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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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% of young people believed the country was 'heading in the right direction', compared to 51% in 2023.

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

Introduction

Next Generation Bangladesh

The British Council's flagship Next Generation series aims to understand the needs, potential, and aspirations of young people globally and seeks to analyse the conditions that support young people and allow them to reach their potential as fulfilled, productive, and active citizens. Next Generation reports look at young people's views on a wide range of aspects such as education, employment, political engagement, lifestyle, hopes and fears, values and beliefs, international outlook, and opinions on the wider world. At the heart of this series is a commitment to exploring youth voice and choice, with a view to achieving three main aims:

1. Exploring young people's attitudes and aspirations, and how the changes around them form their life choices and constructs their worldviews.
2. Amplifying youth voice by placing youth in the spotlight.
3. Supporting better youth policymaking by ensuring their voices are represented in decisions that may have lasting implications on their lives.

Undergoing a demographic dividend, Bangladesh presents a distinctive opportunity for organisations such as the British Council which is dedicated to supporting and exploring the country's vibrant and growing youth population. Young people, as we see through a plethora of activist organisations, have serious potential to be agents of positive, meaningful change. So, what are the barriers? And what change do they desire? As uncovered in the previous Next Generation studies in 2010 and 2015, young people face numerous challenges that can hinder their financial, educational, and social inclusion. Marginalised groups such as rural communities, young women, Trans, Intersex and Queer (TIQ) persons, persons with disability, and those below the poverty line are also particularly vulnerable, exacerbating the negative effects of a lack of access to opportunities and social inclusion.¹⁰

Furthermore, perceptions of corruption, a restricted civic space, and a lack of access to justice have led some young people to become politically disengaged. The country is currently undergoing significant transformation, and youth have demonstrated a strong

desire for progress and change despite scepticism regarding the direct impact of their civic and political participation.¹¹ Access to reliable information, transparency in governance, greater employment opportunities, and citizen education can all play crucial roles in fostering trust and security and empowering young people to make active, meaningful, and informed decisions.

Considering recent developments, including economic challenges, the continued negative effects of climate change, unemployment issues and high levels of youth Not in Education, Employment or Training, educational disparities, Next Generation Bangladesh thus provides an excellent, timely opportunity to uncover the motivations, aspirations, and experiences of young people to harness their potential as active citizens.

Specifically, the research explored:

- **Values and influences:** What societal, cultural, and familial factors shape the values and belief systems of young people in Bangladesh? How do these values manifest in various aspects of their lives?
- **Youth empowerment and voice:** To what extent do young people in Bangladesh feel empowered to participate in decision-making processes that affect them? Are their voices heard and considered by their communities and society at large? What avenues exist for them to initiate change?
- **Key challenges and concerns:** What are the most pressing issues facing young people in Bangladesh today? How do these challenges impact their daily lives, and what implications do they have for their future well-being? How do young people perceive and navigate these issues?
- **Support and solutions:** What forms of support and assistance do young people require from their immediate surroundings and broader Bangladeshi society to realise their aspirations? What solutions do they propose to address the obstacles they encounter in pursuing their goals and ambitions?

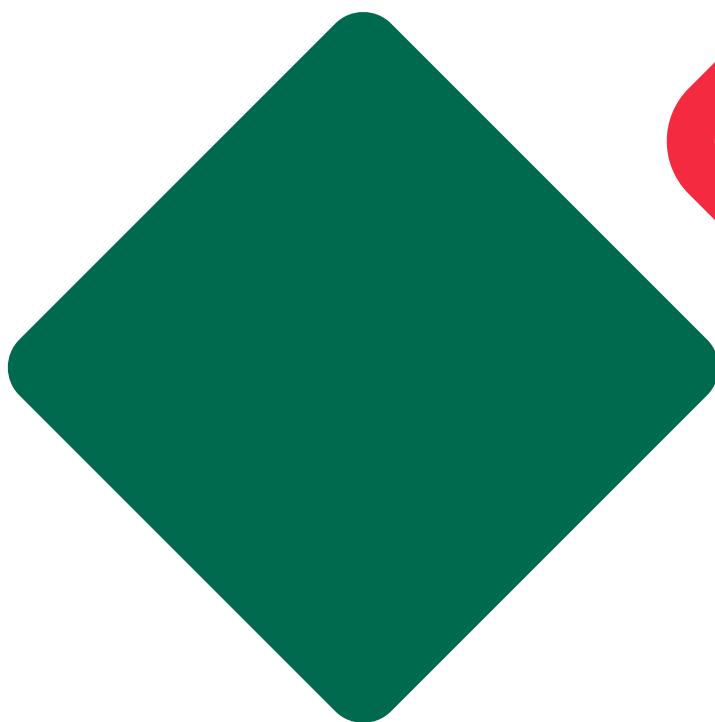
¹⁰ BRAC. (2020). A report on National Summit on Marginalised people of Bangladesh. www.brac.net/program/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/A-report-on-National-Summit-on-the-Marginalized-People-of-Bangladesh.pdf

¹¹ BRAC. (2019). Youth of Bangladesh: Agents of change. www.brac.net/program/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/YOUTH-SURVEY-2018_full.pdf.

Who are young people in this research?

Overall, 3,081 young people aged 18 to 35 were consulted for this research study to provide a robust and comprehensive picture of the lives of young Bangladeshi people. The research employed a participatory mixed-methods approach, including a nationally representative survey, interactive online community platform, community case studies and deliberative sessions with a panel of young people to validate and co-create the research.

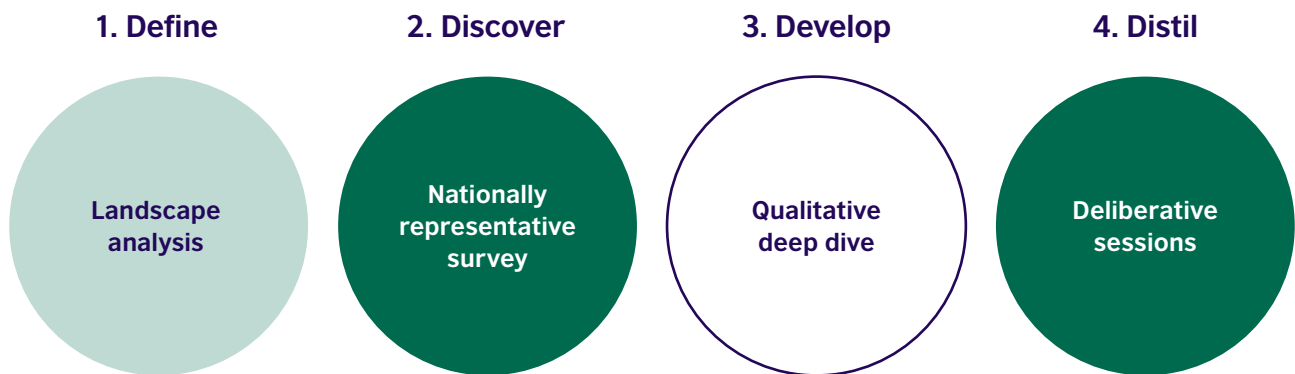
For further detail on the sample, please see Annex 1.



Methodology and analytical framework

We designed a four-phased methodology to explore young people's perceptions of their livelihoods, the challenges and barriers encountered by young people, and the solutions they devised to overcome these obstacles (Figure 1). Our research was targeted to align with the priority areas outlined in the National Youth Policy, the key themes and sub-themes of the Next Generation global programme and the priorities of young people.

Figure 1. Research design.



Stakeholder engagement at key junctures through a Youth Task Force (YTF)

Our methodology was guided by three key principles:

- **Meaningful participation:** At the heart of our methodological approach was meaningful participation, particularly of young people. We aimed to empower young people to play an active role in shaping the research. By valuing their experiences and voices, we sought to foster a sense of inclusion and commitment to generate findings that were representative of the perspectives and realities of youth in Bangladesh.
- **Collaboration and stakeholder engagement/management:** We believed in the importance of meaningful engagement with key stakeholders and youth representatives throughout the research study. By actively involving relevant individuals, organisations, and institutions, we created a collaborative environment where diverse perspectives and expertise contributed to Next Generation Bangladesh's success. We ensured that the research was informed by the opinions, insights, and needs of stakeholders, leading to more relevant and targeted outcomes.
- **Generating novel, actionable insights:** Our primary goal was to generate useful, practical findings to drive positive change for young people. We placed emphasis on ensuring that our research outcomes could provide clear, implementable recommendations to inform policies, programmes, and practices that would directly benefit the livelihoods of young people, addressing the local and global challenges they faced.

The following section provides a deep dive into each separate phase.

a. Landscape analysis

A comprehensive review of published literature (contextual analysis, relevant statistics, and insights) and key informant interviews with stakeholders were conducted to explore the attitudes, aspirations, and behaviours of young people in Bangladesh. This analysis considered various factors such as ethnicity, gender, disability, socio-economic status, and geography. We drew upon key studies, reports, and commentary, such as – but not limited to – the previous Next Generation Bangladesh studies in 2010 and 2015, BRAC's [Youth of Bangladesh](#) survey in 2019, Citizen's Platform for SDGs, Bangladesh's [review of disengaged youth](#) in 2021, United Nations Volunteers' (UNV) youth consultations for [The World We Want](#) in 2013, and Rasel Hussain's 2021 study on the [cultural impact of globalisation on Dhaka youth](#). From this review, three critical dimensions of the young people landscape were identified for further investigation. Firstly, the focus was on climate change, examining youth concerns, education, willingness to take action, and support needed. Secondly, attention

was given to barriers and solutions, analysing challenges in education, employment, and youth voice, considering differences by demographics and the impact of digitisation in the job market. Lastly, the exploration centred on youth voice, investigating how young people perceive their agency, engage in social and democratic life, and overcome barriers, particularly young women. The objective of this landscape analysis was to pinpoint evidence gaps and define focus areas for the subsequent localised survey questions.

b. Nationally representative quantitative survey

Phase 2 involved the implementation of a nationally representative opinion survey across Bangladesh of young people aged 18-35. This survey aimed to capture essential data points regarding the outlooks, priorities, aspirations, and perceived barriers to success among young people. Utilising a standardised survey template, augmented with additional lines of questioning, the survey was designed to address all research questions outlined in the initial phase. Conducted face-to-face using the Computer-Assisted Personal Interview (CAPI) method, the survey involved electronic devices to aid interviewers in data collection. The sample size comprised 2,600 respondents from the main survey sample and an additional boost sample of 400, all aged between 18 and 35. The sampling distribution ensured national representation, including a balanced urban/rural divide and gender parity (male:female = 50:50) in accordance with population demographics. Leveraging CAPI technology offered numerous advantages, including enhanced data quality, efficiency, multimedia integration, real-time analysis, and heightened data security.

c. Qualitative deep dive

Online community platform

Phase 3 utilised an online community platform to leverage collaborative qualitative capabilities for engaging with 25 urban youth and generating prompt results. This platform facilitated the exploration of emerging themes identified in Phases 1 and 2 of the research initiative. The online community platform addressed key research questions, including the priorities of young people in Bangladesh, the role of social media, and differences across various youth groups, localities, genders, ethnicities, and socio-economic backgrounds. Additionally, it delved into the role of identity in youths' lives, the main barriers affecting them in education, employment, and youth voice, and their solutions to these barriers. Methodologies employed in the online community included projective 'letter to' tasks, collage boards, focus group discussions, polling, and idea boards.

Community case studies

Eight community immersion case studies were conducted, one per national division of Bangladesh, to understand the experiences, concerns, and proposed solutions of young people. Each study focused on key issues identified during the Define and Discover phases of the Next Generation thematic areas. These included varying climate vulnerabilities, climate migration, inclusion in community life, education and employment levels, and early marriage and gender-based violence. The case studies involved individual sessions with young people and their communities, followed by triad interviews with friends/peers and in-depth interviews with influential community members. In total, 24 interviews and eight focus groups were conducted, providing valuable insights into the challenges and opportunities faced by young people.

d. Deliberative sessions

As part of our approach to empower young people in guiding the research process, we conducted two deliberative workshops involving a panel of 16 young individuals representing diverse geographic regions and covering key youth categories from the National Youth Policy (outlined above). These included Youth Entrepreneurs, Youth Migrants, Ethnic Youth, Youth with Special Needs, TIQ Youth, Youth Affected Negatively by Climate Change, Youth Victims of Human Trafficking and Youth Contacted with Communicable Diseases. The workshops aimed to validate insights gathered during the Define, Discover, and Develop phases and collectively generate solutions to identified challenges. Each two-hour workshop, attended by up to eight participants, included introductions, presentations of key findings, validation, solution brainstorming, and participatory activities. The insights from these workshops informed our deeper data analysis and the structuring of the final narrative report.

e. End-to-end stakeholder engagement

Phase Six entailed a comprehensive stakeholder engagement programme through consultative workshops with a dedicated Youth Task Force (YTF), integrated across the entire research and project duration. The YTF's involvement aimed to address and validate responses to all research inquiries outlined initially. The process began with stakeholder mapping, identifying key youth networks, government partners, policymakers, and development actors. Upon the identification and mapping of stakeholders' interests, the multi-stakeholder YTF was onboarded in collaboration with the British Council. Consultative workshops with the

YTF occurred at pivotal stages, including post-landscape phase completion, Stop and Think workshops for survey result review and theme identification, and dissemination workshops for insights and recommendations.

Analytical framework

The Next Generation study goes beyond merely gathering young people's perceptions; it aims to elucidate the interconnected nature of perceptions, pathways, and potentials for young people. It begins by unravelling the intricate landscape of youth **perceptions**, shedding light on their attitudes towards societal dynamics, national identity, and global issues, and the key influencers. This understanding serves as the foundation for navigating the various pathways available to young people for personal and professional growth.

Transitioning to **pathways**, the narrative builds upon the insights gleaned from perceptions, delving into the exploration of avenues such as education, employment opportunities, and civic engagement. By analysing the institutional frameworks and infrastructure supporting youth development and the potential barriers, it highlights the critical role played by factors like digital literacy, political participation, and civic engagement in empowering the youth.

Finally, the analysis progresses to **potential**, leveraging the foundation laid by perceptions and pathways. Here, the focus shifts to unlocking the potential of young people and harnessing their contributions to societal progress. Through a detailed examination of career readiness, entrepreneurship, and digitisation, this segment underscores the transformative impact of these elements in unleashing youth potential and fostering economic prosperity and active citizens. Moreover, it emphasises the importance of addressing systemic barriers to youth empowerment and highlights the catalytic role of youth-led initiatives in driving positive social change and fostering innovation.

Chapter 1

Perceptions



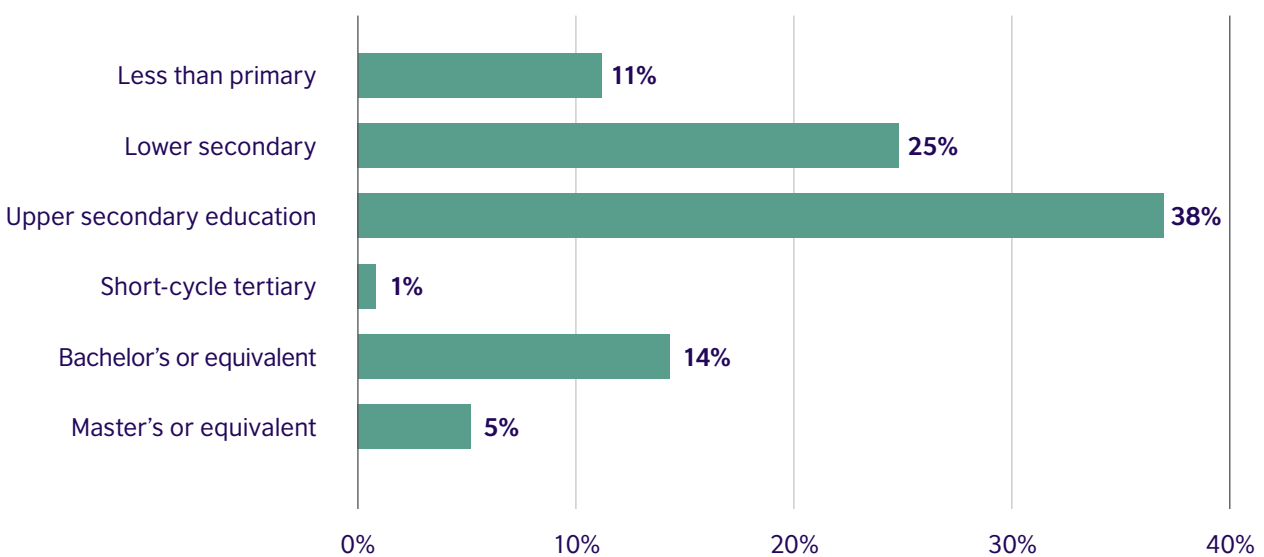
Image: Innovative Research and Consultancy, 2024

Summary: Profiles, beliefs, and values

Demographic profiles

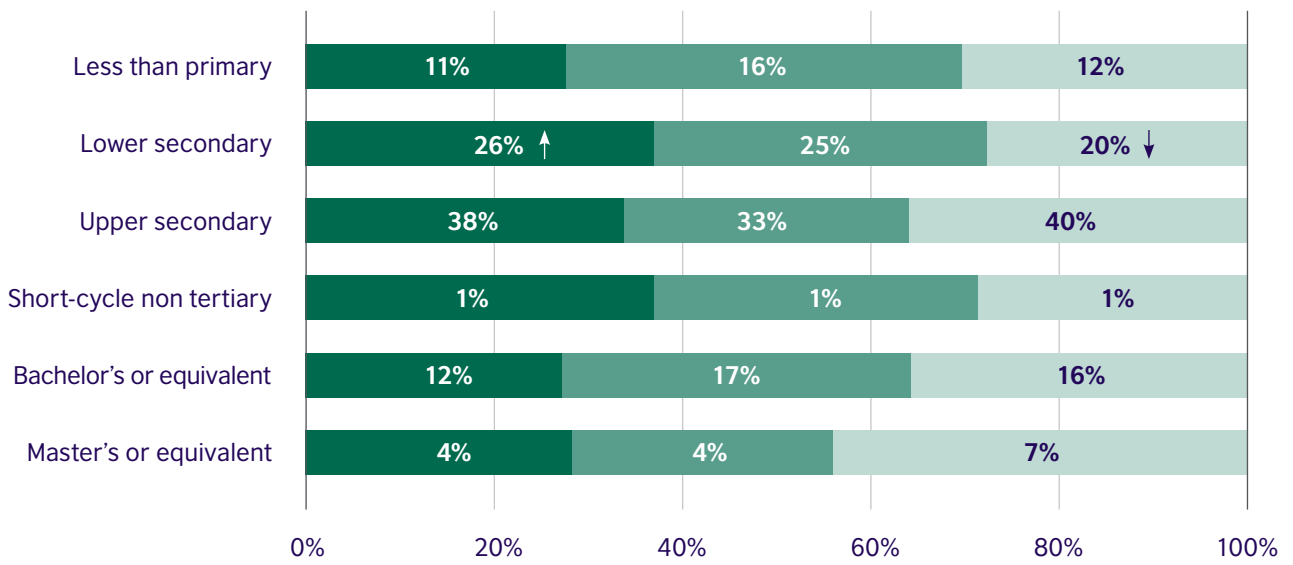
The nationally representative survey captured the voices of 3,000 young people aged 18-35. The sample was diverse, with over 70 per cent under 29, a majority (69 per cent) from rural areas, and purposive inclusion of minorities like Hindus (nine per cent), people with disabilities (five per cent), TIQ people and the 16 youth categories outlined in the Bangladesh National Youth Policy. Just over two in five young people (43 per cent) were NEET youth, in line with recent statistics from the 2022 Census. Young people aged 25-30 were the most likely to report being unemployed (16 per cent). Most young people completed upper secondary schooling (38 per cent), with 19 per cent achieving higher education qualifications. A minority of young people dropped out of school with less than primary education, with a quarter obtaining lower secondary, with minor variances by urban/rural.

Educational attainment profile of the sample:



Educational attainment by urbanity:

● Peri-urban ● Rural ● Urban



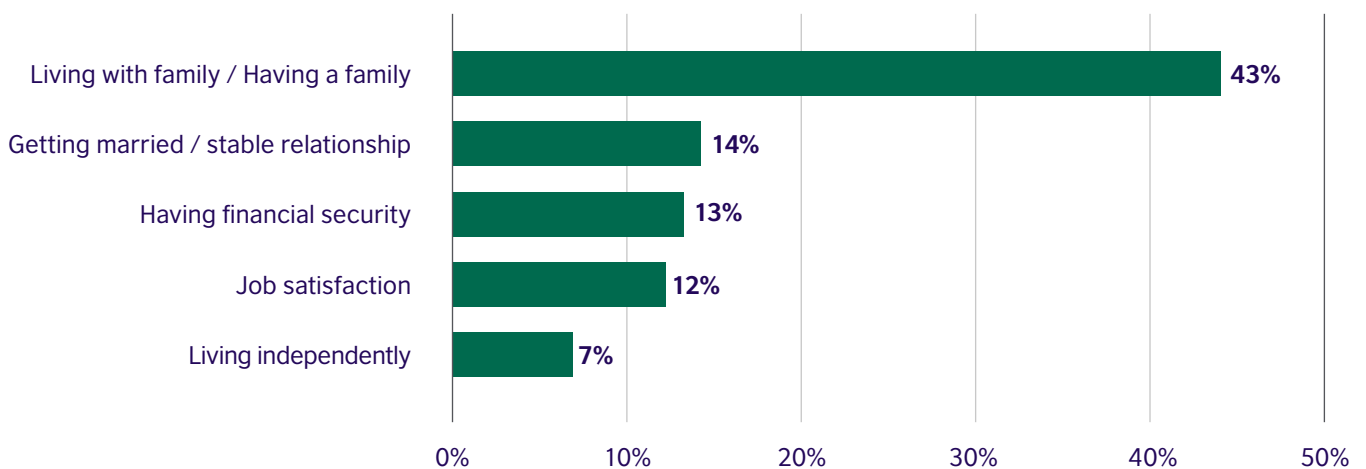
Values

Young people are proud to be Bangladeshi and appreciate a mix of collectivist and individualistic values such as hard work, honesty, education, community bonds, and the centrality of family, which is especially regarded as a cornerstone of social life.

Pride in being Bangladeshi stems from:



The top 5 contributors to happiness and success for Bangladeshi young people are:

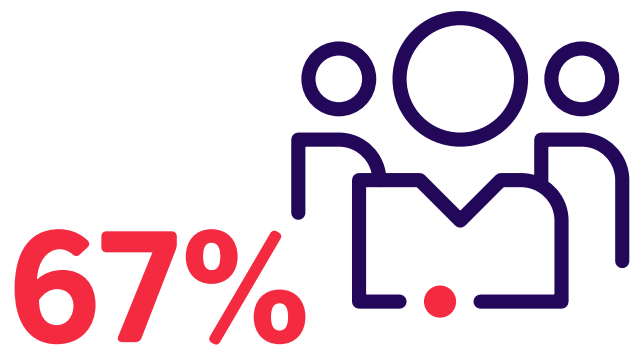


However, there's a sense of disillusionment among the youth due to society's failure to support their individualistic values. Concerns revolve around the lack of effective community leadership, and a gap between educational priorities and what young people value—such as creativity and innovation. The influence of community leadership is low, with family and friends being the most influential voices in young people's lives. Another aspect of disenchantment pertains to women feeling marginalised in public discourse and life.

“

Creativity and talent still don't matter here. Status, power, lobbying, and political power are valued here.

- Male respondent, 30-35, Dhaka



67% of young people reported 'family' as the most influential voices in their lives.

“

The patriarchal structure we are living in; it's the main obstacle that gets in the way of living up to my self-images and values.

- Female, 25-29, Dhaka



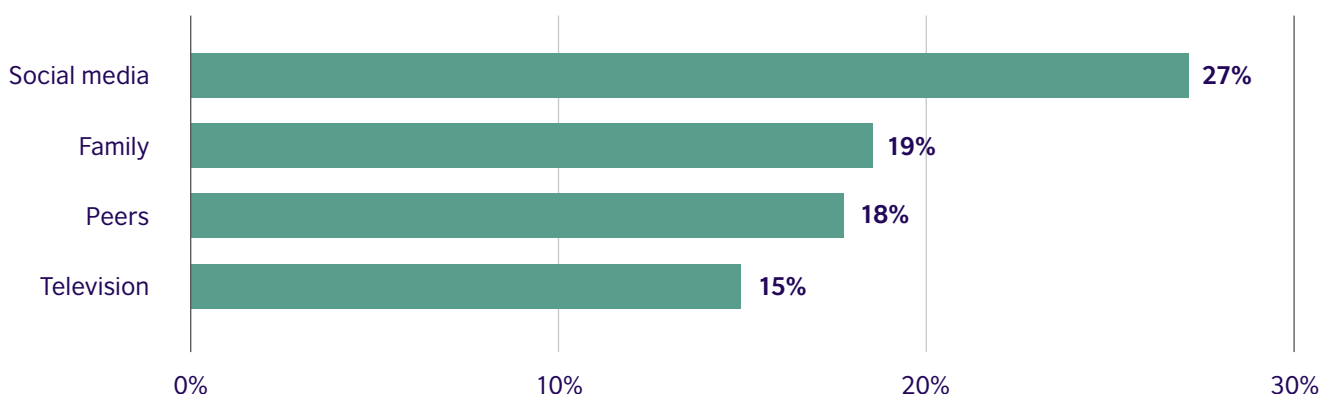
21% of young people reported 'peers and friends' as the most influential voices in their lives.

Online engagement, gender divide & gender inequalities

Online engagement and gender divide

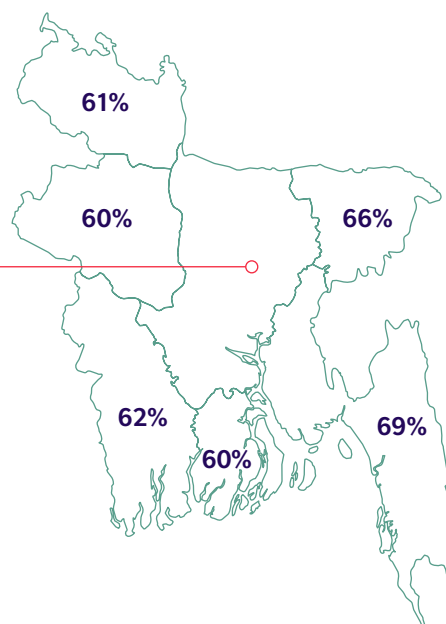
Two-thirds of young people are active online, relying primarily on social media platforms for news (27 per cent), including Facebook (78 per cent) and YouTube (86 per cent) due to their perceived transparency compared to traditional media.

Most popular news sources:



73%

of young people reported 'family' as the most influential voices in their lives.

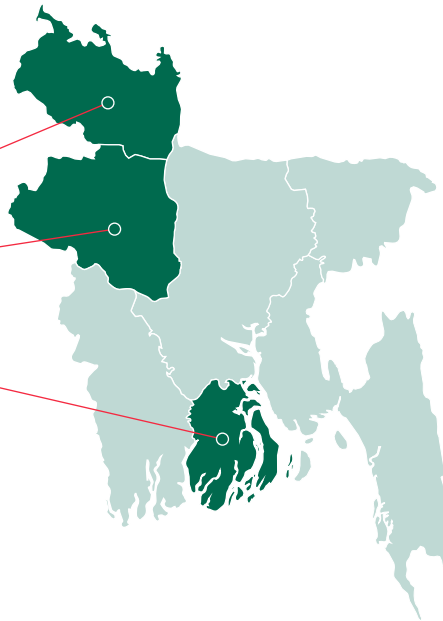


However, a **notable digital disparity persists** regionally and by gender, linked to levels of educational attainment. Over three-quarters of young men (77 per cent) use the internet, compared to just over half of young women (56 per cent), **with rural women reporting the lowest**. Across all factors, women and those with lower education are less likely to use the internet, which impacts regional internet usage. Women in Barisal have the lowest overall levels of female education, explaining particularly low internet use in the region.

Barisal, Rangpur, and Rajshahi reported the lowest internet usage among women out of the divisions.

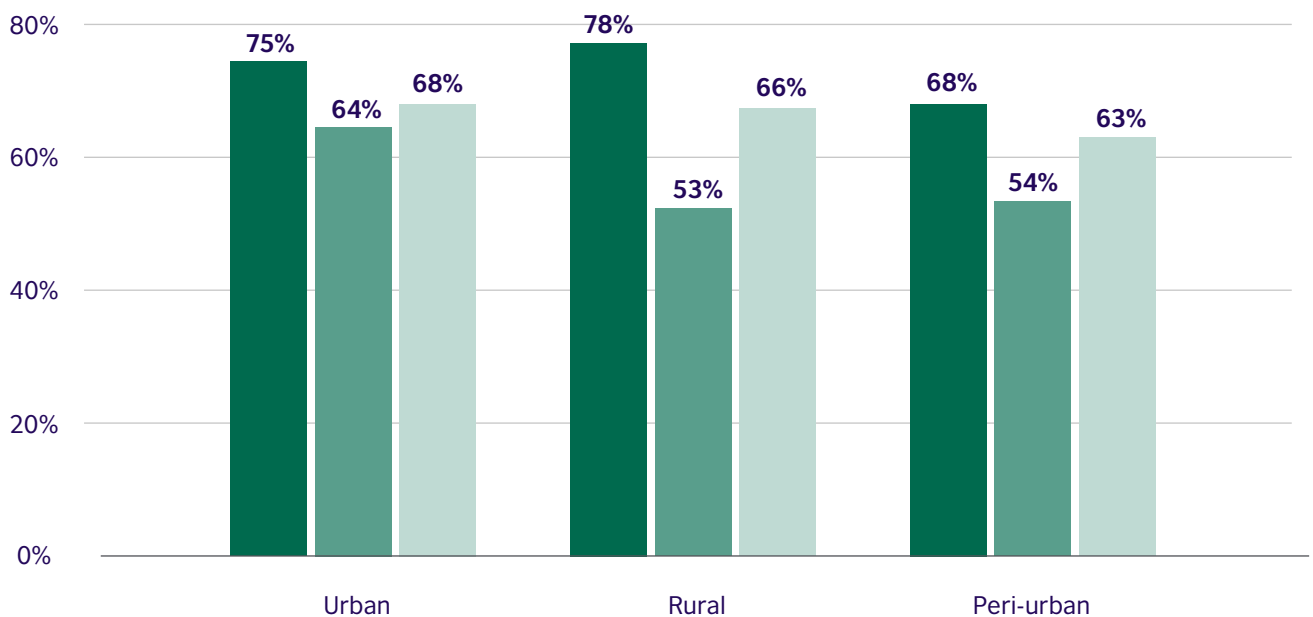
35%

of women in Barisal were online in between August 2023-November 2023, linked to lower educational levels.



Internet users by urbanity and gender:

● Male ● Female ● All

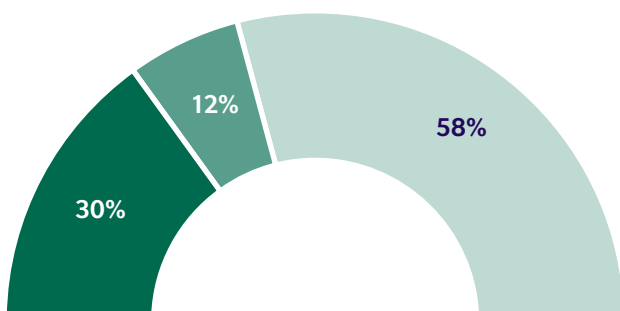


Persisting gender inequalities

Young people in Bangladesh overwhelmingly endorse positive gender norms for women, yet some **discriminatory attitudes persist**, particularly among young men and regarding the public life of women. While more than 80 per cent believe in women's rights, including voting and education, approximately **30 per cent of young men hold views opposing gender equality**. Furthermore, urbanity and income class significantly influence attitudes towards discriminatory gender norms.

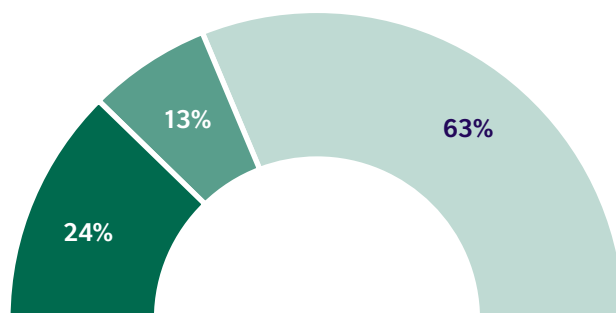
Male respondents only:

“Women and girls are equal to men”.

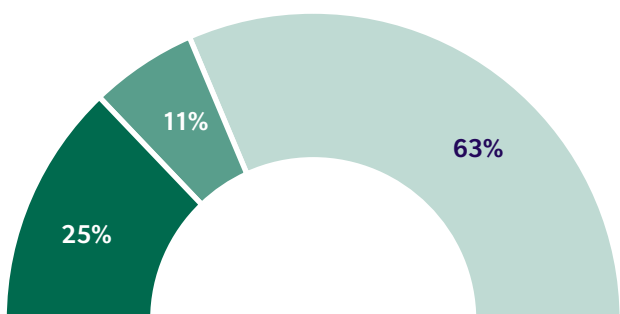


- Disagree (strongly + somewhat)
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Agree (strongly + somewhat)

“Women and girls should have the right to work outside of the home”.



“Women and girls should have the same freedoms to things outside the house as men”.



Gender-based discrimination and violence, such as domestic abuse and workplace harassment, remain prevalent yet often go unreported due to entrenched patriarchal norms. The widespread existence of discriminatory attitudes and practices has significant repercussions for the empowerment of women in Bangladesh.

“

Many husbands claim they can do whatever they want and are not afraid of anyone. They believe they have the right to beat their wives because they provide for them.

- Male respondent, 30-35, Dhaka

“

Eve-teasing is increasing...There are “Kishor Gangs” who gather in the evenings, engaging in eve-teasing and harassing women, it means we cannot go outside.

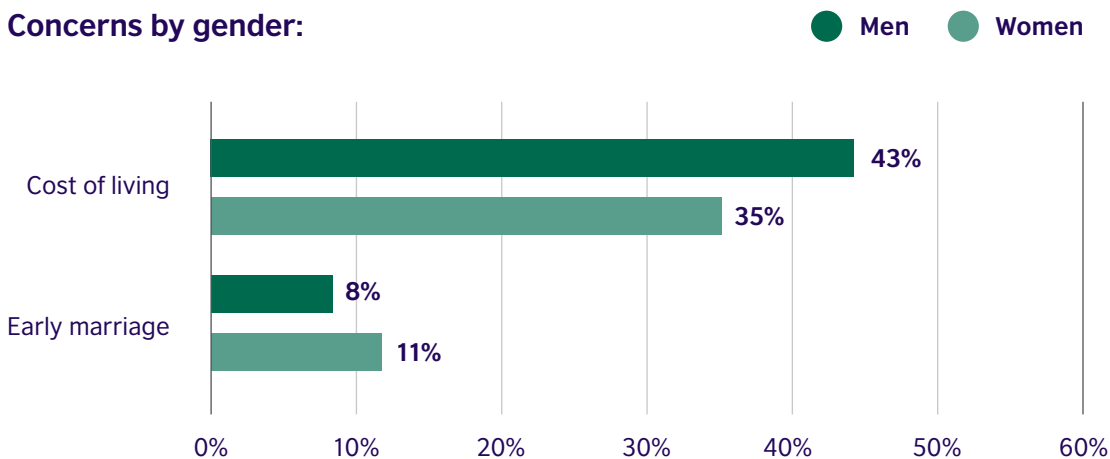
- Female, 25-29, Dhaka

Youth challenges, aspirations, and recommendations

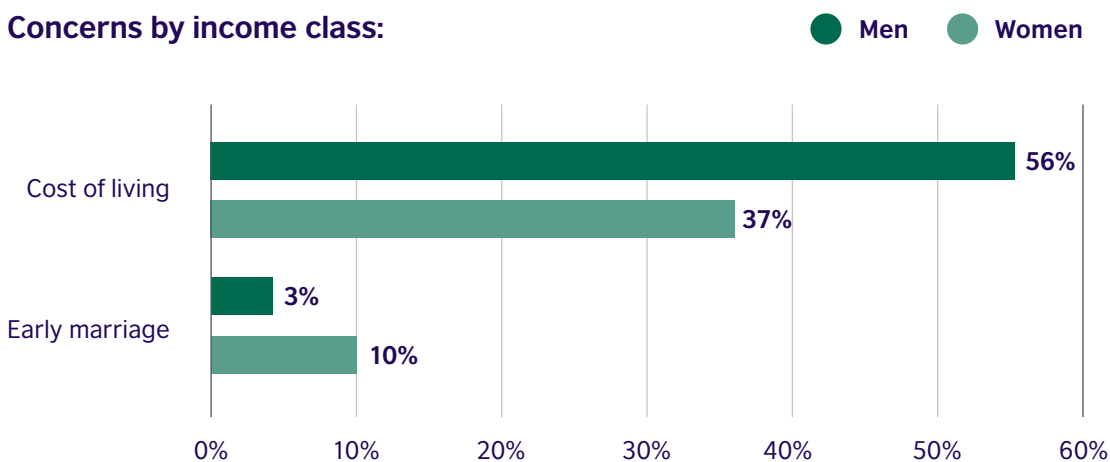
Youth challenges & aspirations

According to young people, the community faces several significant challenges currently, including high cost of living (39 per cent), and a lack of job opportunities (18 per cent). Over the last five years, lack of access to food/water and substance abuse issues (25 per cent) have been particular issues, disproportionately affecting rural men. The prevalence of these societal challenges differ based on factors such as gender, urbanisation, education levels, and socio-economic status.

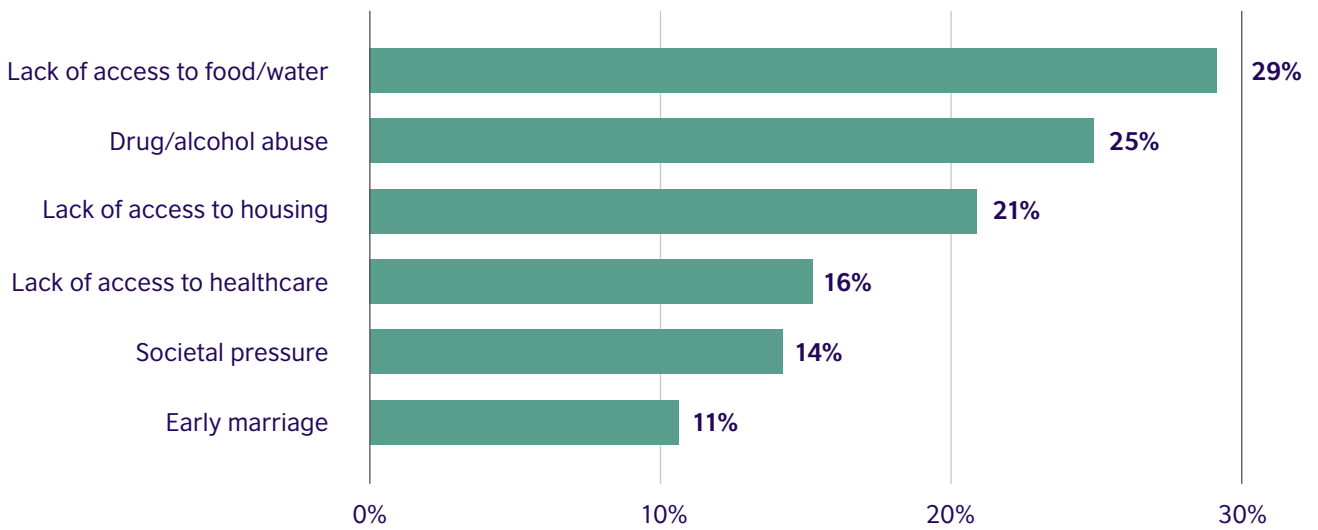
Concerns by gender:



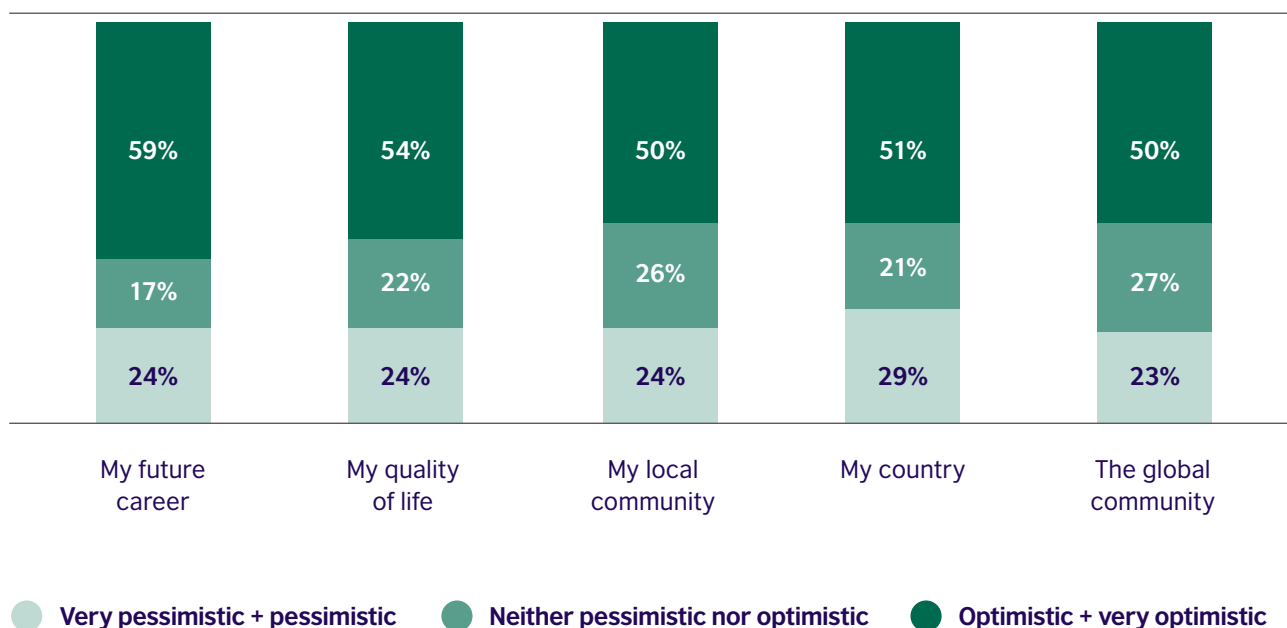
Concerns by income class:



Challenges that have had a negative impact in the last 5 years:



Despite facing challenges, 57 per cent of respondents expressed that their lives were better than those of their parents'. However, optimism regarding the country's future has decreased by nine per cent since 2015, attributed to global economic instability and restricted employment prospects. Looking at perceptions of the country's future, it's notable that young people in the higher income classes were most likely to report pessimistically, with only four in ten higher income class respondents expressing optimism.



I am personally optimistic as I feel like I have the skills to have a better future here. Speaking about Bangladeshi youth, they might feel pessimistic as there is a lack of job opportunities.

- Male, 25-29, Dhaka

Recommendations

This summary outlines the main findings concerning the diverse backgrounds, values, digital involvement, and aspirations of young people, while emphasising the persistent gender inequalities and socioeconomic obstacles they confront. Below is a snapshot of the recommendations derived from the insights presented in Chapter 1 – they can be found in further detail in Chapter 4 ‘Conclusions and recommendations’.

- 1. Strengthen community leadership:** Encourage genuine engagement between local leaders and youth, showcasing successful models like those in Barisal, which can aid in this effort.
- 2. Tackle gender disparities:** Implement targeted programmes to enhance technology access for rural women, ensuring equal opportunities for all.
- 3. Expand digital infrastructure:** Implement initiatives to improve digital access and connectivity in rural areas, encouraging private-public partnership.
- 4. Review Domestic Violence Prevention and Protection Act:** Assess effectiveness, pinpoint obstacles, and suggest improvements with input from stakeholders.
- 5. Promote youth creativity:** Collaborate with CSOs, youth-led organisations, and government bodies to enhance co-curricular activities like debating, sports, culture, performing arts, creative industries, arts and literature alongside academic classes.

1. Perceptions of Bangladeshi young people

This chapter explores the diverse perspectives of young people, encompassing the demographic profile of the sample, youth values, digital engagement, and aspirations for the future. It delves into the intricate interplay between personal beliefs and societal expectations, highlighting the pivotal role of family and the enduring importance of education among youth despite concerns regarding its societal reward.

1.1. Demographic profiles

Profiles are aimed at understanding the demographic facets of young people (representative of National Youth Policy) and how it shapes their perceptions of society and their place within it. Understanding the socio-demographic profiles of young people in Bangladesh offers crucial insights into the multifaceted nature of their lives. By examining factors such as age, gender, education, and socioeconomic status, we gain a comprehensive understanding of their experiences and challenges. This understanding is essential for developing targeted interventions and policies that can effectively address their diverse needs and empower them to thrive in various aspects of life.

Bangladesh is a majority Muslim country with a significant youth population. From a sample size of 3,000 Bangladeshi young people, evenly split between male (49 per cent) and female (51 per cent) participants, the survey found that **over 70 per cent of respondents were under the age of 29**, while 91 per cent of the sample identified as Muslim. **Most young people (69 per cent) live in rural areas of the country** (in line with the most recent 2022 census data¹²) and **over three-quarters (77 per cent) are lower income earners** (see Figure 2).

Minority and marginalised groups were given special attention and purposively sampled in this survey to further enhance the country's major demographic indices. This included the youth categories outlined in the National Youth policy,¹³ women (51 per cent of the sample), Hindus (nine per cent of the sample) and people with disabilities (five per cent of sample). Marginalised groups were 13 per cent of the total sample size to achieve this goal.

Just over two in five young people (43 per cent) were NEET youth, disproportionately made up of parents and caregivers, who make up 30 per cent of the overall sample.¹⁴ This is in line with recent statistics of the NEET youth share, at 41 per cent in 2022.¹⁵ Young people aged 25-30 were the most likely to report being unemployed (16 per cent). Young women make up 97 per cent of parents and homemakers, which is also the most prevalent occupation among respondents in both rural (31 per cent) and urban (28 per cent) areas.¹⁶

Most young people completed upper secondary schooling (38 per cent), with 19 per cent achieving higher education qualifications (Bachelors and Masters). A significant minority of young people dropped out of school with less than primary education, with a quarter obtaining lower secondary.

The factors highlighted above will be used throughout the report to better understand the perceptions, pathways, and potential of young Bangladeshi people.

¹² In line with the geographical breakdown of 18–35-year-olds in the Preliminary Census 2022 data, most respondents reside in Dhaka, (27%), followed by Chittagong (20%), Rajshahi (12%), Rangpur (11%), Khulna (11%), Sylhet (7%), Mymensingh (7%) and Barisal (5%).

¹³ The youth categories outlined in National Youth policy have been covered: Youth with Special Needs, Youth Affected Negatively by Climate Change, Youth Migrants, Ethnic Youth, LGBTIQ+ Youth, Youth Victims of Human Trafficking, Youth Contacted with Communicable Diseases, Youth Entrepreneurs, Youth Victims of Human Trafficking.

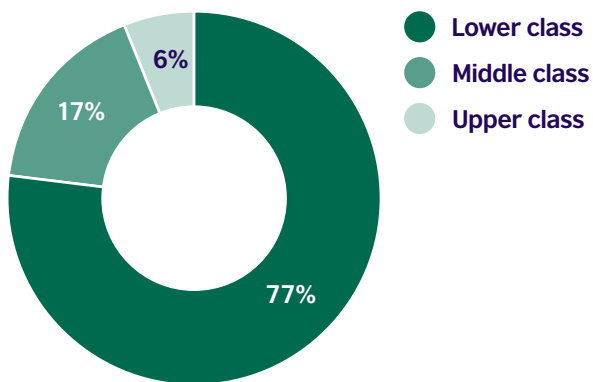
¹⁴ Note that the age range of participants, from 18-35 can contribute to the high number of sole parents and caregivers.

¹⁵ Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics. (2024). Bangladesh Sample Vital Statistics 2022.

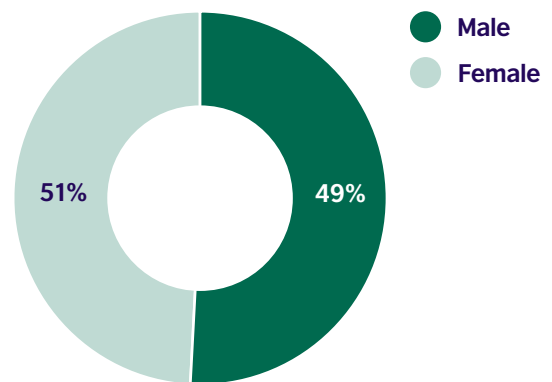
¹⁶ The high level of parents and homemakers in the sample may be due to the nature of the nationally representative household survey, which involved door-to-door interviews with randomly selected individuals within selected households. Although potential household respondents are selected randomly and in the instance they were not home, enumerators made three further attempts for a suitable time, there may have been a natural skew.

Figure 2. Demographics of sample.

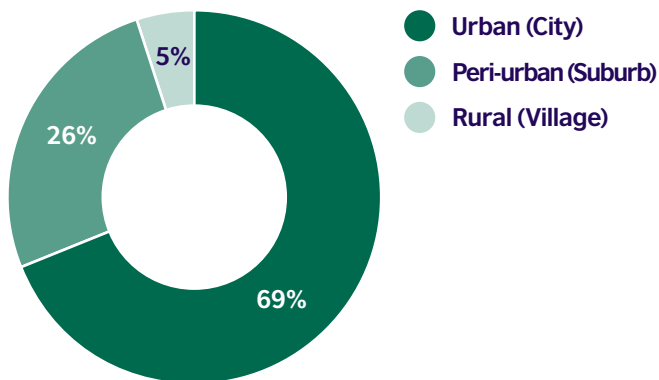
Social class breakdown:



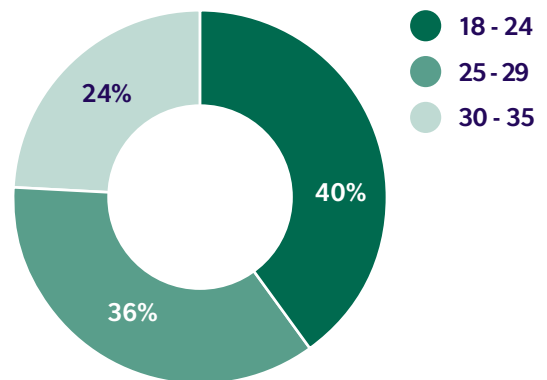
Gender breakdown:



Urban/rural breakdown:



Age breakdown:



1.2. Youth beliefs and values

Headline findings:

- Young people exhibit a dynamic blend of collectivist and individualistic values, shaped both by their aspirations for societal change and their commitment to community.
- Individually they uphold hard work, honesty, and education as driving values, guiding their decisions, and these factors are seen as key for both societal and personal development.
- Youth are however disenchanted with the ability to live out these values, based on what they feel Bangladeshi society prioritises and the limiting social structures of Bangladesh's society, particularly for young women.

1.2.1. Balancing personal and collective values: young people are navigating tensions with societal norms and are feeling disenchanted

Values refer to deep-seated and underlying evaluations about what is important in people's lives and how they think the world should be. They act as a guiding principle for how people set goals, make decisions, and behave. **Young people in Bangladesh prioritise values such as tolerance, fairness and equality, family, honesty, and integrity, reflecting strong societal bonds and hospitality.** This was also evident in the qualitative findings, where universally all respondents shared that their more collectivist values stem from the value of community, exemplified through their inclination towards helping others and remaining honest. This was true even when it comes to speaking up against ideals they do not agree with, for instance by addressing taboo topics that others in their community or family might shy away from. **They also hold pride in being a citizen of Bangladesh, which is intrinsically linked to its language (55 per cent) and culture (14 per cent).**

“I am a self-confident, productive, and hard-working person. I try to help others because it gives mental satisfaction that [money] can't buy.” (Female respondent, 18-24, Rajshahi, upper secondary education, student).

“Our social bond, hospitality, sincerity, selfless love is something you will find nowhere else” (Male Respondent, 30-35, Dhaka, employed full time, PhD).

As part of the research, young people engaged in a two-week online community where they created 'Identity and Values' boards to visually represent the most important values in their lives and how this relates to their self-identity. Across these boards, **young people reflected both individual and collectivist values**, stressing principles of acceptance, equity, and personal values like honesty, integrity, flexibility and creativity.

“Humanity can bring peace in [the] world and doing no harm is one of the essential key tools of ensuring humanity. Besides, equity helps to reduce the differences in humankind.” (Young woman, 18-24, Sylhet, student and freelancer).

However, the country’s sociopolitical realities have led to **youth disenchantment with society and the ability to live out these values**. Perceptions of a lack of community leadership, with no respondents in our survey considering community leaders as influential, points to a disconnect between youth and leadership as well as dissatisfaction with current societal structures. Indeed, youth perceive that leaders prioritise power and status over individual merit.

“Creativity and talent still don’t matter here. Status, power, lobbying, and political power are valued here”. (Male Respondent, 30-35, Dhaka, entrepreneur).

Further, focus group discussions illuminated the **disconnect between the education system and the values and priorities of young people**, with many feeling that it fails to nurture creativity and innovation, leaving them undervalued and voiceless. The overwhelming consensus (69 per cent) among young people was that education should be the primary tool for addressing pressing global issues

like unemployment, along with fostering creativity and innovation (12 per cent) and promoting research and innovation (nine per cent). Innovation, flexibility, and creativity are seen as crucial aspects of an education system that aligns with the aspirations and values of young people. However, our qualitative research suggests that young people do not feel that they are getting this from the education system. This underscores the urgent need for educational reforms that prioritise creativity, innovation, and skill development to better meet the needs and aspirations of today’s youth.

There is also **deep-seated disenchantment among young women with societal structures and norms** that hinder their ability to live in accordance with their identity and values, as well as their engagement in public life. Nearly eight in ten young women (79 per cent) expressed feeling ‘very unengaged’ in the political sphere, compared to just over half of young men (51 per cent), highlighting significant gender disparities in representation in Bangladeshi society. This disengagement is largely attributed to the prevailing patriarchal structure and societal norms.

“The patriarchal structure we are living in, it’s the main obstacle that gets in the way of living up to my self-images and values.” (Female Respondent, 25-29, Dhaka, employed full-time).

Context:

In line with this, several **previous research studies highlight the norms preventing women from** participating in economic and social lives. Cultural restrictions on women’s behaviour, imposed by people in their families and societies as well as their own values and beliefs, limit women’s ability to find employment outside the household, resulting in women forgoing this employment despite available opportunities. Another ongoing research project finds that society and family imposes dressing norms on young women that limit their self-expression.

This **limitation on expression for young women is felt both in the real world and online.** Fear of online abuse and harassment is preventing many young women from openly expressing their values online.

“We are afraid and ashamed to openly discuss sensitive yet very important issues like politics, religious values, periods, sex education, gender etc. With social media, these things become even more terrifying. So, I refrain myself from getting involved in these troubles and ask the people around me to do the same. But this is not the right move. I want to speak my mind without fear, I want to express my opinion and values in public” (Female respondent, 25-29, Chattogram, Master’s, employed full time).

Recent studies have pointed to the **pervasive issue of gender-based violence (GBV) on social media**, particularly targeting female public figures advocating for women’s rights. Despite their efforts to challenge stereotypes, they face intense backlash, especially regarding contentious topics like consent and sexuality. The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated online GBV, causing psychological harm and dissuading women from engaging in digital spaces.¹⁷

Online backlash not only silences women in digital spaces but also constrains gender justice activism, undermining efforts to promote gender equality.¹⁸ Addressing this issue requires comprehensive strategies that safeguard freedom of speech while holding perpetrators of online violence accountable. Evaluating existing legal frameworks, such as the Digital Security Act 2018 and enhancing their effectiveness in combating online GBV are critical steps towards fostering a safer and more inclusive digital environment for all users.

There is an urgent need for addressing entrenched gender biases, and traditional norms to create inclusive spaces that empower young people, and specifically young women, to actively participate in public discourse, decision-making processes and live by their values.

1.2.2. Family holds high societal importance for young people, yet the value placed on it is gendered, reflecting the influence of traditional gender norms

For many young people, **the family unit and interpersonal relationships feature as central building blocks of social life.** This implies the prevalence of a normative culture which is more collective and based on community values. Over half of respondents (57 per cent) believe that living with family/having a family (43 per cent) and getting married or having a stable relationship (14 per cent) are key contributors to happiness and success.

However, there are significant differences between men and women. For instance, 66 per cent of women highlighted that the living with family/having a family and getting married or having a stable relationship were the most important contributing factors to personal success or happiness vs 47 per cent of men (Figure 3). **Young men on the other hand are more likely to value financial and employment factors (29 per cent of men vs 20 per cent of women).** This form of societal organisation is further strengthened by traditional beliefs about gender roles where young men are viewed as providers and women as homemakers. A third of urban male respondents (33 per cent) believe that job satisfaction and financial security are contributors to happiness, while 29 per cent of rural men believe the same. Young men are therefore more likely to value financial and employment factors, while young women are more likely to value family/relationship factors.

Despite this distinction between genders, family-oriented factors remain the most achievable success indicators in the eyes of young people with job satisfaction (12 per cent), travelling (11 per cent) and financial security (13 per cent) rated as the three most unobtainable success indicators. This is linked to young people’s doubt of their ability to achieve upward social mobility, highlighting a slightly deflated national economic outlook.

“Attainability affects how all people prioritise and evaluate their goals, and family is a key part of Bangladesh’s culture” (Male respondent, 25-29, Dhaka, employed full time, Bachelor’s)

¹⁷ Mahpara, P., Antara, I. J., Nath, S. R., & Pabony, N. A. (2022). Tracking Gender-Based Violence and Backlash Against Women’s Rights in the Digital Space: Cases from Bangladesh.

¹⁸ Mahpara, P., Antara, I. J., Nath, S. R., & Pabony, N. A. (2022). Tracking Gender-Based Violence and Backlash Against Women’s Rights in the Digital Space: Cases from Bangladesh.

Figure 3. Contributors to personal happiness and success by gender.



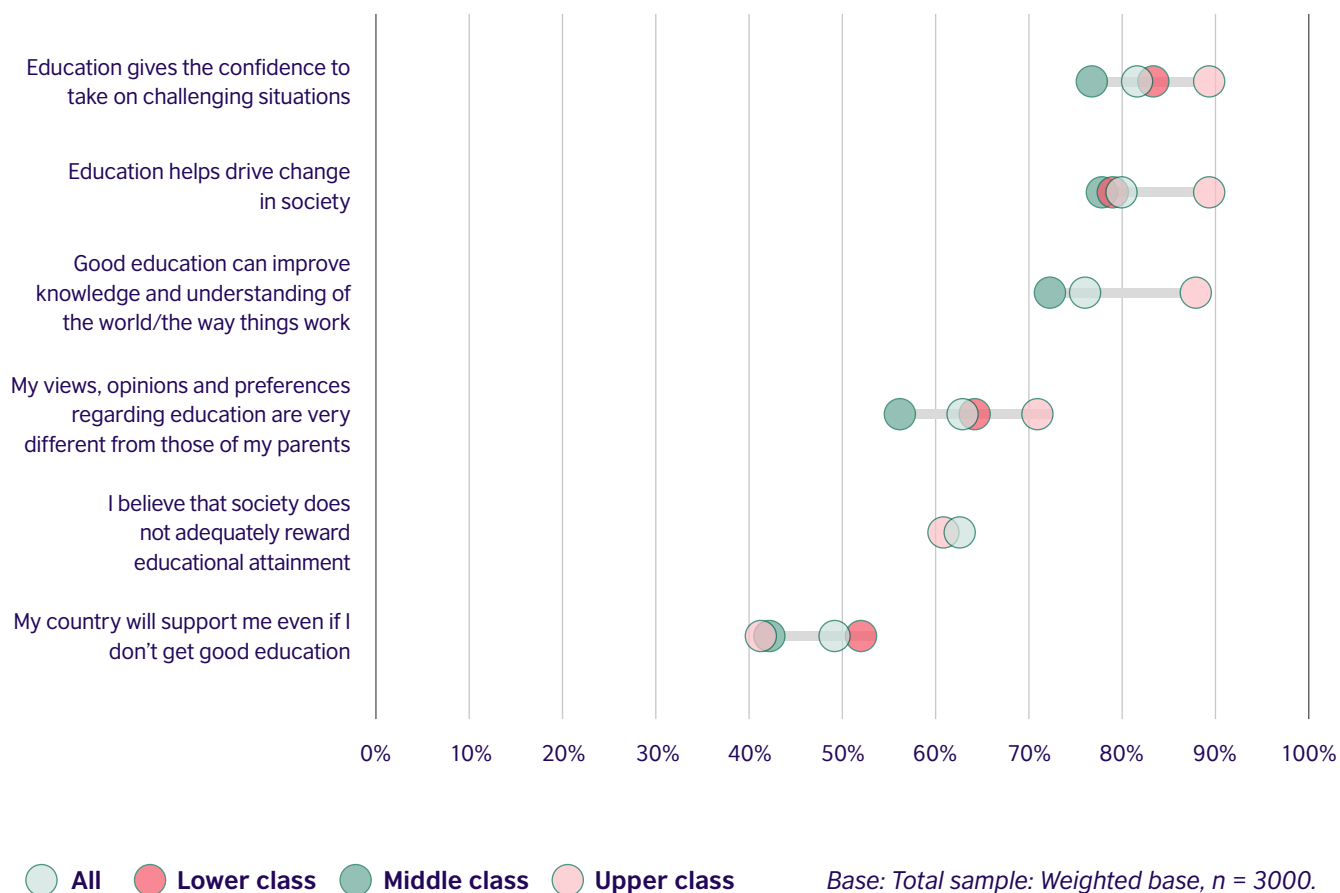
1.2.3. Education is strongly valued among young people, but reservations remain about the societal rewards associated with it

The belief in education as a driver of social change is prevalent among young people. **Over three-quarters (75 per cent) of respondents believed that education helps drive societal change and prepares people to understand the world.** As explored above, an education system that fosters creativity and innovation is seen as the key response to global pressing issues, across unemployment, climate change, and poverty. Furthermore, it is seen as integral to success in Bangladesh by three in ten young people who do not believe they will receive support without a good education. However, highlighting the previously noted tension between values and society, almost two-thirds of young people believe that **educational**

attainment is not adequately rewarded (Figure 4.) This suggests that education is highly valued by young people, but efforts need to be made to ensure that this value in education is reflected across society.

Young people from higher social classes and educational attainment are more likely to believe in the aspirational potential of education, believing it can drive change in society, improve knowledge and understanding of the world, and increase confidence in the face of challenging situations. Young people from lower social classes are less likely to believe in the necessity of a good education to obtain support from their country (see Figure 4).

Figure 4. Percentage of those who agree with the following statements by social class.



Young urban men are more likely to believe in the aspirational factors of a good education than young urban women (Drive change: 85 per cent urban male vs 78 per cent urban female), and to hold very different views, opinions, and preferences regarding education than their parents (63 per cent urban male vs 59 per cent urban female). **Young people in rural areas hold stronger beliefs about the available support from their country even if they do not get a good education**, but young women in both urban (45 per cent) and rural (55 per cent) areas report higher belief in the availability of support compared to their male counterparts (urban: 40 per cent; rural: 48 per cent).



Young people from lower social classes are less likely to believe in the necessity of a good education to obtain support from their country.

1.3. Online presence of young people

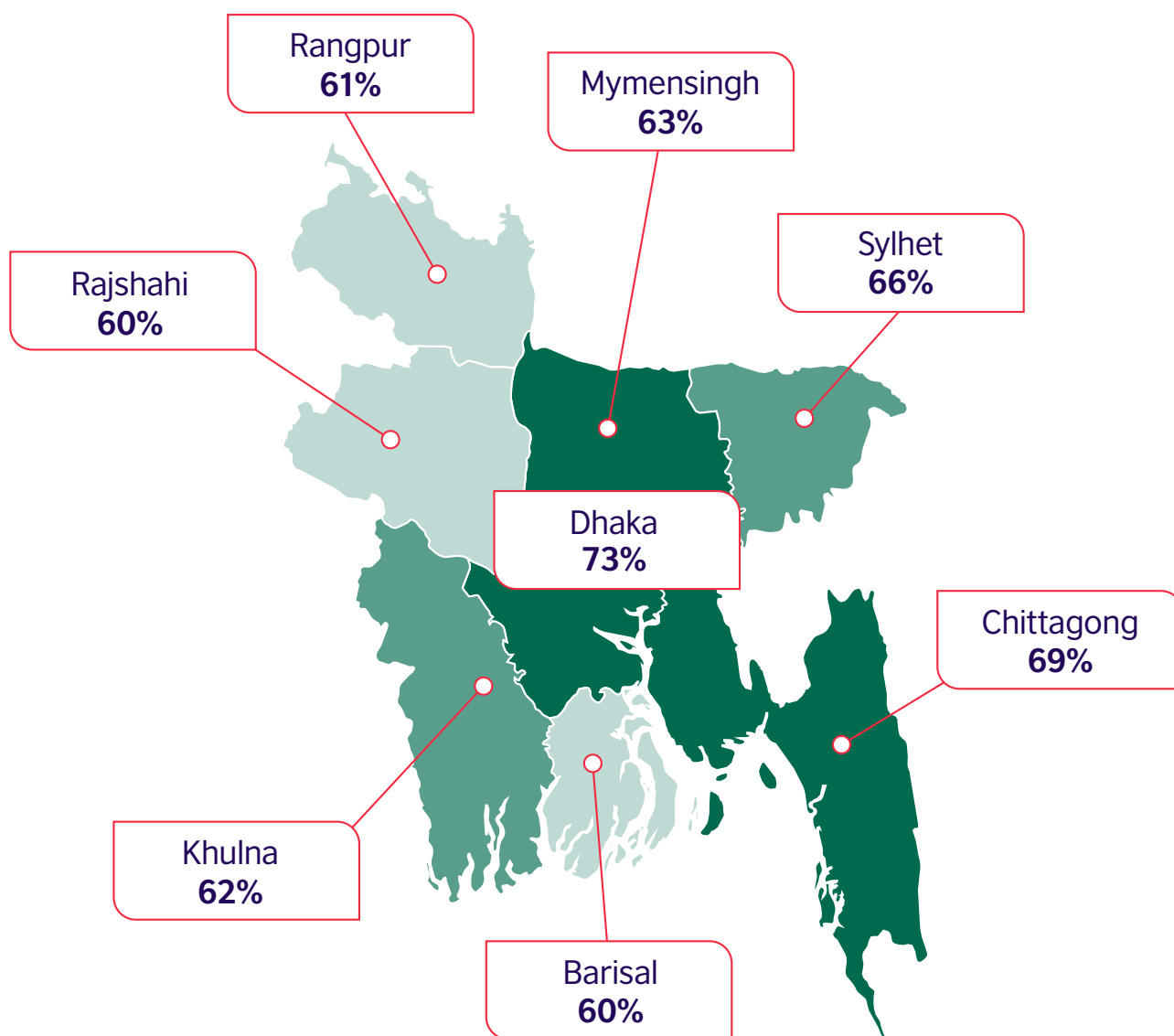
Headline findings:

- Most young people are online (66 per cent) and using the internet, with the highest usage in Dhaka. However, a significant proportion of young people remain offline, with a third (33 per cent) reporting no internet use between August 2023-November 2023.
- There is a large digital divide between young males and females, especially in rural Bangladesh; this gender divide in digital access is likely rooted in gendered social norms.
- The most used platforms include Facebook (78 per cent), WhatsApp (76 per cent), Tik Tok (69 per cent) and IMO (63 per cent), with an average of three hours spent on social media daily.

1.3.1. Young people are increasingly online, but a gender and urban/rural divide persists, reflecting deeply entrenched social norms and attitudes

Two-thirds of young Bangladeshi people are online and using the internet (66 per cent), and at least six in ten young people in each division are connected, with Dhaka reporting the highest usage in the last three months (73 per cent) (see Figure 5).

Figure 5. Percentage of young people who have used the internet in the last three months by division.



Base: Total sample: Weighted base, n = 3000.

Male respondents (77 per cent) are significantly more likely to be internet users than their female counterparts (56 per cent). This is particularly salient among rural youth, where only two in ten rural men are non-internet users, compared to almost five in ten or half of rural females, pointing toward a clear digital divide in the sample (see Figure 6). This agrees with previous research highlighting the large disparities in digital access between young men and women. For example, while over a quarter of boys aged 14-16 reported using smartphones in a recent BIGD survey, only eight per cent of girls in the same age group did. These gaps widened further among 17–20-year-olds, with 46 per cent of boys and 26 per cent of girls reporting smartphone usage.¹⁹

Previous research has found that the gender divide in digital access was not simply a result of economic factors, but deeply **rooted in social norms and attitudes**. Adolescent boys were granted far more

freedom and mobility compared to girls, allowing them to independently access shared family devices, Wi-Fi networks, and purchase mobile data. They also employed various negotiation tactics, like controlling passwords, to maximise their ‘snatched time’ on digital devices.²⁰ Parents, especially mothers, were found to be more lenient and indulgent towards boys’ digital usage. In contrast, girls’ access was severely restricted due to fears about romantic relationships and ‘delinquent’ behaviour. Parents were much more willing to provide boys with their own phones or allow them to go out with the shared family device.²¹ The online presence of young people in Bangladesh points to the continued gender-based digital gap, with boys significantly more active internet users than girls, particularly in rural areas. To address this gap, action is needed to challenge societal norms and attitudes that restrict girls’ access to digital devices.

Figure 6. Internet users by urbanity and gender.



¹⁹ Matin, I., Haque, L., & Jahan, N. (2021). How social norms are increasing the digital divide between genders.

²⁰ Matin, I., Haque, L., & Jahan, N. (2021). How social norms are increasing the digital divide between genders.

²¹ Matin, I., Haque, L., & Jahan, N. (2021). How social norms are increasing the digital divide between genders.

1.4. Digital discourse and media influence

Headline findings:

- Online presence and social media form an integral part of the lifestyles of an increasing number of Bangladeshi young people.
- Social media's main appeal lies in its ease of access and the perception of greater transparency compared to traditional media.
- Online accessibility facilitates increased political and civic engagement, with young internet users more likely to consider political engagement as important across all levels (local, national, global).
- Significant concerns about the impact of social media are centred on its effect on mental health and the increased risks of exposure to adult content, cyberbullying, and comparison-driven behaviour.

1.4.1. Social media emerges as the primary source of news for young people, driven by perceptions of its greater transparency compared to traditional media

In our current digital era, **social media stands out as the foremost news source for young people, with declining reliance on traditional forms of media, including television, newspapers, and radio.** The rise in social media usage for news consumption is significantly influencing young people's views on media reliability and engagement in civic matters.²²

Online presence and social media form an integral part of the lifestyles of an increasing number of Bangladeshi young people, acting as critical touchpoints for the production and transmission of Bangladeshi youth culture today. Most young people are likely to get news and current events from social media (27 per cent) followed by their personal relationships such as family (19 per cent) and peers (18 per cent). The role of television is declining (15 per cent), and radio (0 per cent) is no longer the primary source of news for any young people.

Of the young people who do use social media, YouTube is the most frequently used (86 per cent), followed by Facebook (81 per cent), WhatsApp (77 per cent), Tik Tok (71 per cent), Instagram (67 per cent), IMO (63 per cent), with young men being significantly more likely to be daily users of social media platforms than young women. **People from Bangladesh spend approximately three hours on social media daily,** with young people, particularly college students, being the most active users of social media.²³

This trend highlights an urgent need to delve into the impacts of digital platforms on the dissemination of information, youth dialogue and mental health. **Social media's main appeal lies in its ease of access and the perception of greater transparency compared to traditional media.** Based on our qualitative findings, traditional media outlets such as newspapers, television, and radio, both government-owned and private, are seen to potentially be biased and engage in sensationalism. Social media platforms are therefore perceived to be more transparent and less influenced by vested interests.

²² Hao, X., Wen, N., & George, C. (2014). News consumption and political and civic engagement among young people. *Journal of Youth Studies*, 17(9), 1221-1238.; Fletcher, R., & Nielsen, R. K. (2018). Are people incidentally exposed to news on social media? A comparative analysis. *New media & society*, 20(7), 2450-2468.

²³ Hassan, T., Alam, M. M., Wahab, A., & Hawlader, M. D. (2020). Prevalence and associated factors of internet addiction among young adults in Bangladesh. *Journal of the Egyptian Public Health Association*, 95, 1-8.

“Many government and private media [outlets] have been found spreading news about the shakeup of [their] own party or company, for which youth acceptance has decreased more than before.” (Female respondent, 25-29, Chattogram, employed full time, Master’s).

High perceived censorship and a scarcity of quality content in traditional media is leading younger audiences to the internet, where misinformation and diverse interest groups abound. This trend has spurred the **emergence of individual-led and social media-based channels**, particularly on platforms like YouTube and Facebook, which cater to specific communities, offer valuable information, and leverage digital skills to engage with the younger demographic.²⁴ It has revolutionised how news is consumed, allowing young audiences to engage deeply with content through interactions that traditional media doesn’t offer.

“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).

Social media platforms provide unmatched accessibility and immediacy, granting users the ability to access information conveniently at any time and from anywhere. This heightened accessibility empowers young people to better manage their time while concurrently seeking transparency within the news sector.

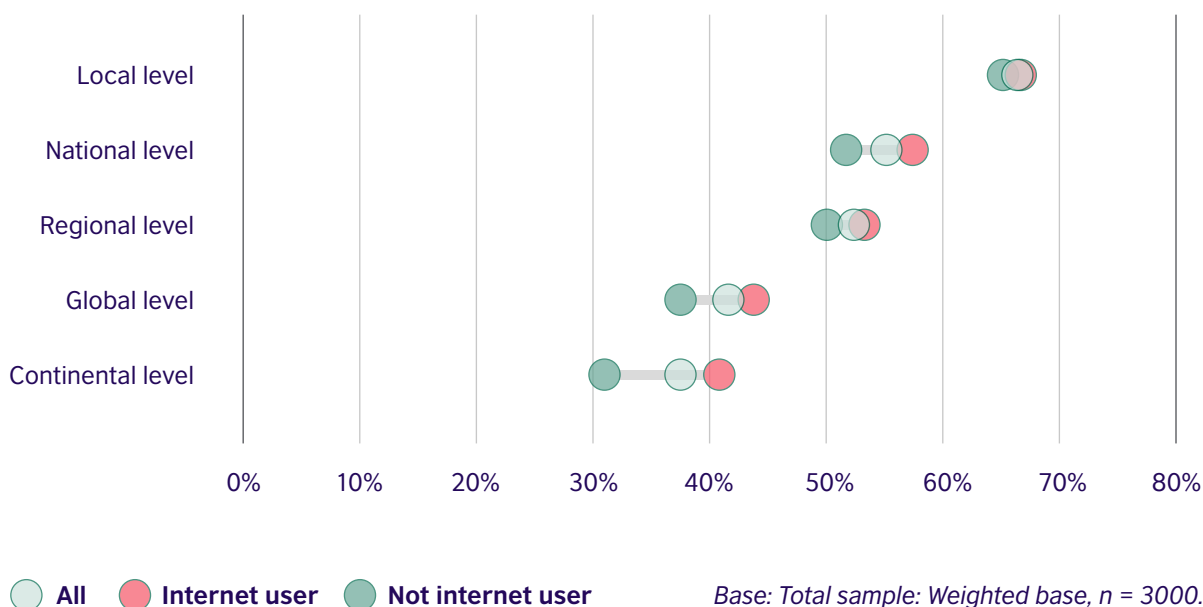
²⁴ International Media Support. (2022). *Bangladesh: A mapping of innovative media*.

Importantly, **online accessibility facilitates increased political and civic engagement** among internet users. They perceive active engagement across various political levels - be it global, national, regional, or local - as crucial, and are more likely to have engaged in climate related activities (see Figure 7). This correlation underscores that the ease of accessing information through social media may contribute to a more politically and civically engaged youth demographic. It underscores the potential for social media to shape the involvement and awareness of youth across different spheres of discourse, including global perspectives.

“As we scroll through our social media feeds, we encounter numerous political discussions. Senior politicians and knowledgeable researchers frequently discuss political matters on various talk shows. They often provide guidance on fostering a healthy political environment.”
(Male respondent, FGD, Barisal).

However, the reliance on social media news also presents **challenges such as the rise of dis- and misinformation, which can mislead users and distort their understanding of current events.**²⁵ **Additionally, social media’s algorithmic structure often also leads to the creation of echo chambers,** which means users are continuously exposed to content that aligns with their existing beliefs, and thus limit a user’s exposure to diverse viewpoints.²⁶ This is especially precarious in political settings, as seen in our quantitative findings in Bangladesh, where online users are slightly more likely to report distrust in the political system than non-internet users. This highlights another angle on the potential consequence of these digital dynamics on trust and political participation. In addition to this, a concern of the prevalence of social media platforms like Facebook among young people as centres on mental health – a point discussed in Annex 2: Deep Dive 1.

Figure 7. Percentage of those who consider it important to be engaged with politics at each level.



²⁵ Aimeur, E., Amri, S., & Brassard, G. (2023). Fake news, disinformation, and misinformation in social media: a review. *Social Network Analysis and Mining*, 13(1), 30.

²⁶ Terren, L. T. L., & Borge-Bravo, R. B. B. R. (2021). Echo chambers on social media: A systematic review of the literature. *Review of Communication Research*, 9.

1.5. Youth views and voices on society

Headline findings:

- Despite generally positive perceptions, discriminatory gender norms persist among young people, especially among young men. One-third of young men (30 per cent) disagree that women and girls are equal to men. However, social class, age, and internet usage influence young people's attitudes towards traditional gender norms.
- Discrimination remains a significant issue in Bangladeshi society, with nearly half of young people (46 per cent) reporting experiences of discrimination based on political beliefs, job status, socio-economic conditions, and disability. The nature of discrimination varies across demographics, with young urban men more likely to report experiences of political violence compared to their female and rural counterparts.
- The prevalence of discriminatory norms has significant implications for women's empowerment, with reports of domestic violence, workplace sexual violence, and exclusion from decision-making. However, reporting reluctance among young women persists due to societal pressures and patriarchal norms.

1.5.1. Perspectives on gender norms among young people are largely positive, but there are a substantial minority of young men who retain discriminatory views

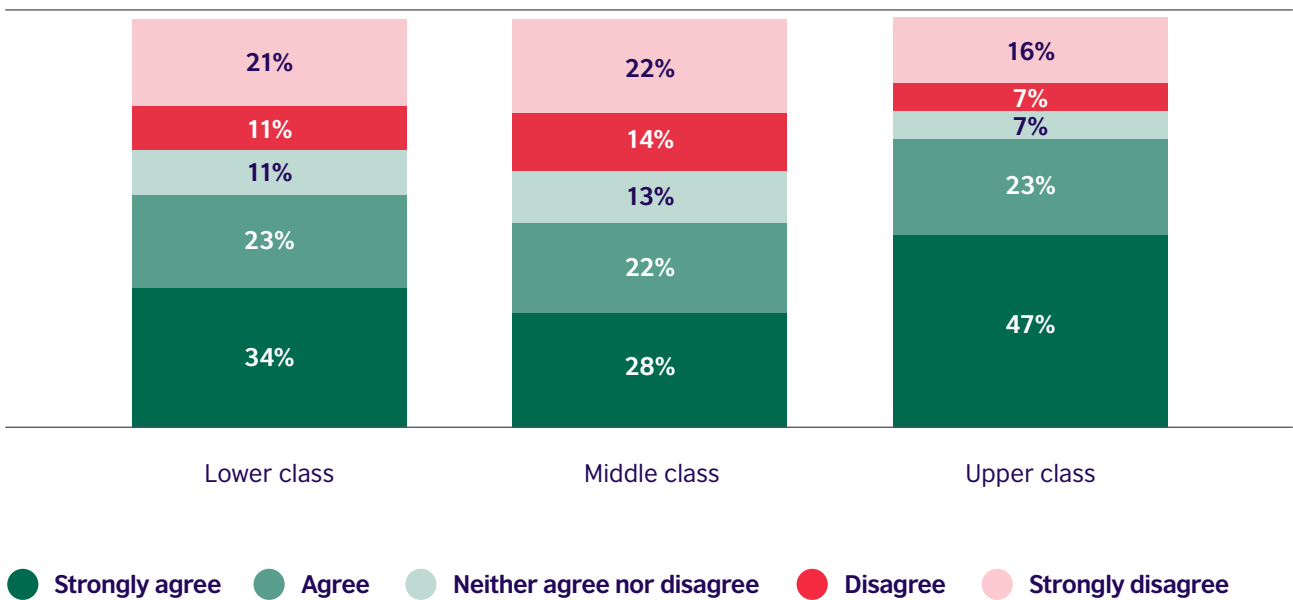
Young people largely support positive gender norms for women; however, discriminatory norms persist, especially amongst young men. While over 80 per cent of respondents believe that women should have the right to vote, be educated and make decisions about their own health, a **significant minority still maintain discriminatory views**. A third of all respondents (33 per cent) disagree that women and girls are equal to their male counterparts, while 16 per cent also do not believe women should have the same freedoms as men, including the right to work.

Regression analysis reveals that, controlling for other factors, urbanity played a significant role on attitudes towards public versus private norms.

Reflecting on whether women should have the right to vote, those in urban areas were 30 per cent more likely than those in rural areas to agree, and 22 per cent more likely to agree that women and girls should be entitled to make decisions about their own health.

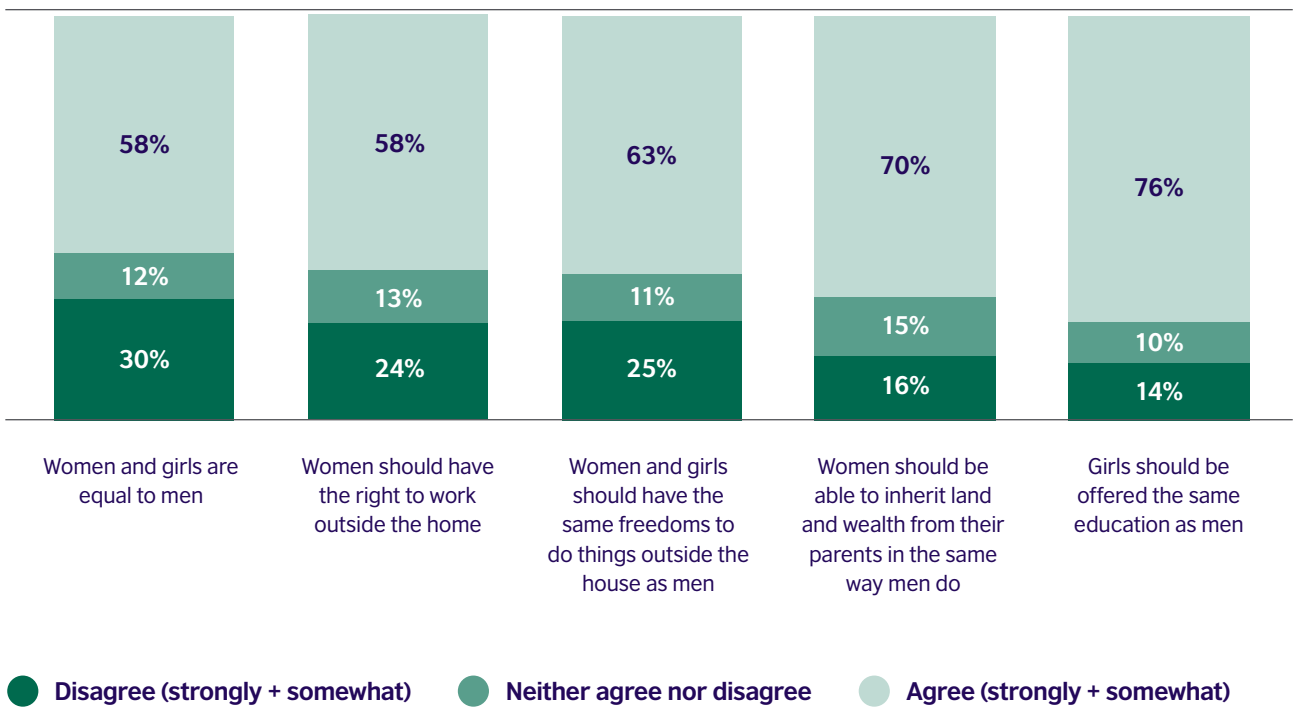
Additionally, **when looking at the breakdown by social class below there is a notable trend that youth from lower and middle classes are more slightly inclined to perceive women as unequal to men**, whereas those in the upper class are more prone to supporting gender equality (see Figure 8). Further regression analysis identifies social class as crucial to the belief that women and girls should have the same freedoms to do things outside the house as men, with those in the upper class being 69 per cent more likely to agree than those in the lowest social class.

Figure 8. How far do you agree: ‘women and girls are equal to men’ by social class.



In line with previous research²⁷, gender also plays a significant role in the perception of gender norms. **Male respondents are more likely than young women to report traditional views on gender norms, with men aged between 31-35 (the oldest cohort in the study) the most likely to do so** (as shown in Figure 9 which includes perceptions on gender norms from young men only).

Figure 9. Attitudes towards women (male respondents only).



Base: Partial sample Male respondents, n=1581

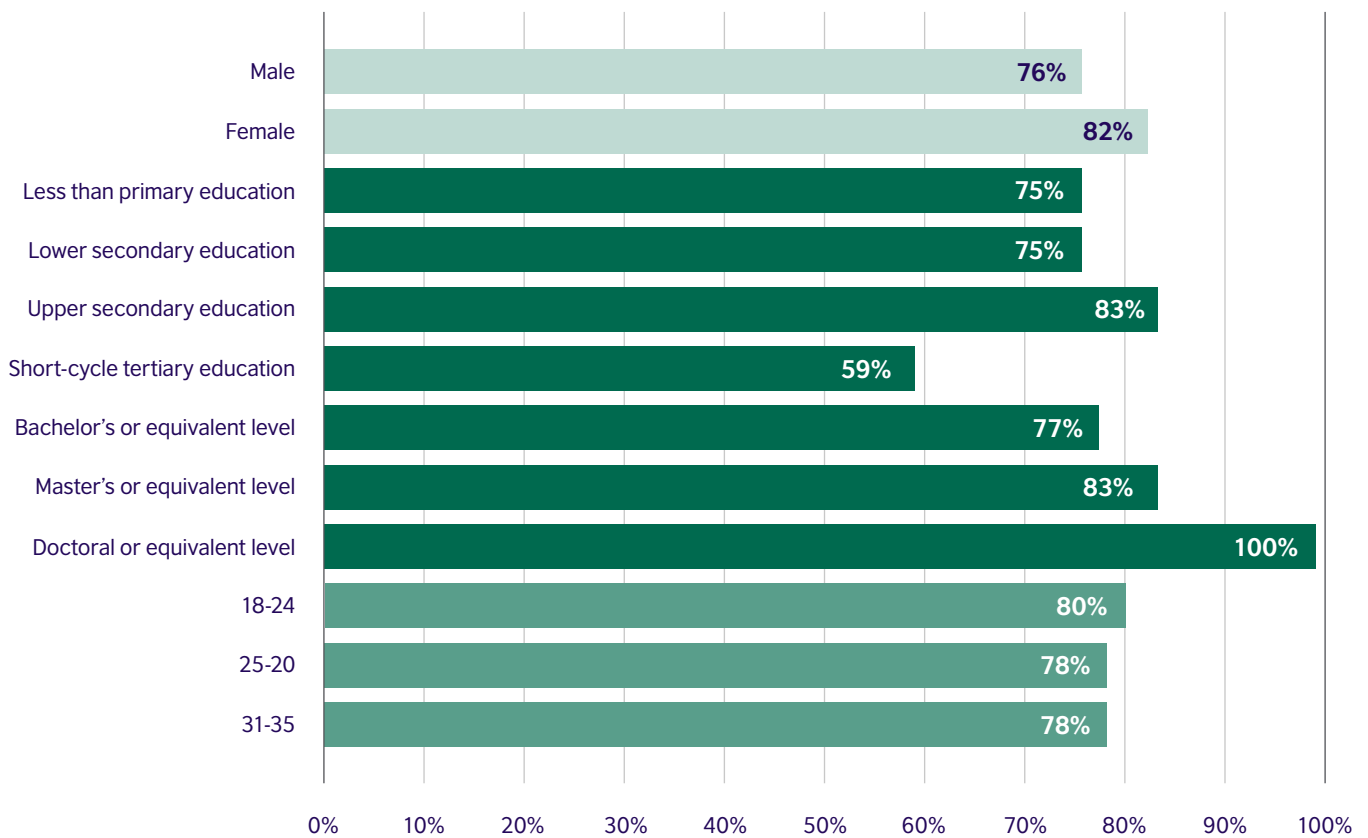
²⁷ These findings on youth and specifically young male perceptions and attitudes towards women’s inclusion align with recent research from the Gender Social Norm Index 2023 which highlighted that over 99% of people in Bangladesh hold at least one bias against women, with 69% believing that men make better political leaders and 88% thinking that men are more capable business executives and are deserving of greater job opportunities. Even more concerning, over 99% of women hold biases against their own gender, perpetuating the very norms that hold them back. *UNDP (United Nations Development Programme). 2023. 2023 Gender Social Norms Index (GSNI): Breaking down gender biases: Shifting social norms towards gender equality. New York.*

Other social indicators such as educational attainment, internet usage and age also impact young people’s attitudes and perceptions towards more traditional gender norms (Figure 10). For example, those in the younger age cohort, aged 18-24, are more likely to challenge traditional gender roles. Similarly, those with higher educational attainment, young women, and those who are internet users are more likely to hold progressive attitudes, which also may encompass questioning traditional gender norms and roles.

Qualitative discussions among young women revealed that while strides have been made, these traditional societal norms remain a barrier to their educational, employment and entrepreneurial opportunities and inclusion.

“The biggest barrier for young women is that many people have a mindset that women should stay at home and look after their husbands and children” (Female respondent, 25-29, Mymensingh, student).

Figure 10. How far do you agree: ‘girls should be offered the same education as man’ by age, gender, and educational attainment.



● Age group ● Educational attainment ● Gender

Base: Total sample: Weighted base, n = 3000.

1.5.2. Experiences and awareness of discrimination and violence amongst young people is high, however significantly vary by gender

Awareness and experiences of discrimination and violence

Respondents believed that the most common causes of discrimination in Bangladesh are political beliefs (48 per cent), job status (47 per cent), socio-economic status (46 per cent) and disability (46 per cent). Discrimination based on gender and sexual orientation are also prevalent, but with gender differences, as eight per cent more women stated that they believed that these kinds of inequalities existed than men.

Further, discrimination is prevalent in Bangladeshi society as **46 per cent of the respondents claim to have experienced discrimination in their lives.** Discrimination based on social status or wealth was the most experienced (27 per cent of all respondents), followed by political orientation (five per cent), gender-based discrimination (five per cent) and sexual orientation (four per cent). Experiences of discrimination and violence vary across age, gender, and locality in Bangladesh. Men were more likely than women to report experiencing discrimination (63 per cent vs 48 per cent), especially based on social or wealth-based discrimination (30 per cent vs 23 per cent) and political orientation (seven per cent vs three per cent). For violence, young urban males are the most likely to experience political violence (19 per cent) than other groups, with women in peri-urban (four per cent) and rural (six per cent) areas the least likely.

Young women expressed feeling silenced and excluded from community decision-making

processes, with elders often relegating them to the sidelines due to their age and gender. A recurring theme emerged regarding the unequal treatment of male and female voices within communities. Many young women lamented that male perspectives are typically prioritised over female voices, resulting in limited opportunities for women to contribute meaningfully to discussions and decision-making. This disparity not only perpetuates gender inequality but also hinders the overall development and progress of communities.

“We are often told to remain silent by elders and not given space because of our age...I feel a male’s voice is heard more than a female’s.” (Female respondent, 25-29, Rajshahi, employed full time, Master’s).

The prevalence of discriminatory norms and practices has profound implications for women’s empowerment in Bangladesh. By restricting women’s participation in decision-making and professional spheres, communities miss out on the diverse perspectives and talents that women bring to the table. Moreover, unequal access to opportunities based on gender perpetuates systemic barriers to women’s advancement, thwarting their ability to achieve their full potential and make significant contributions to society.

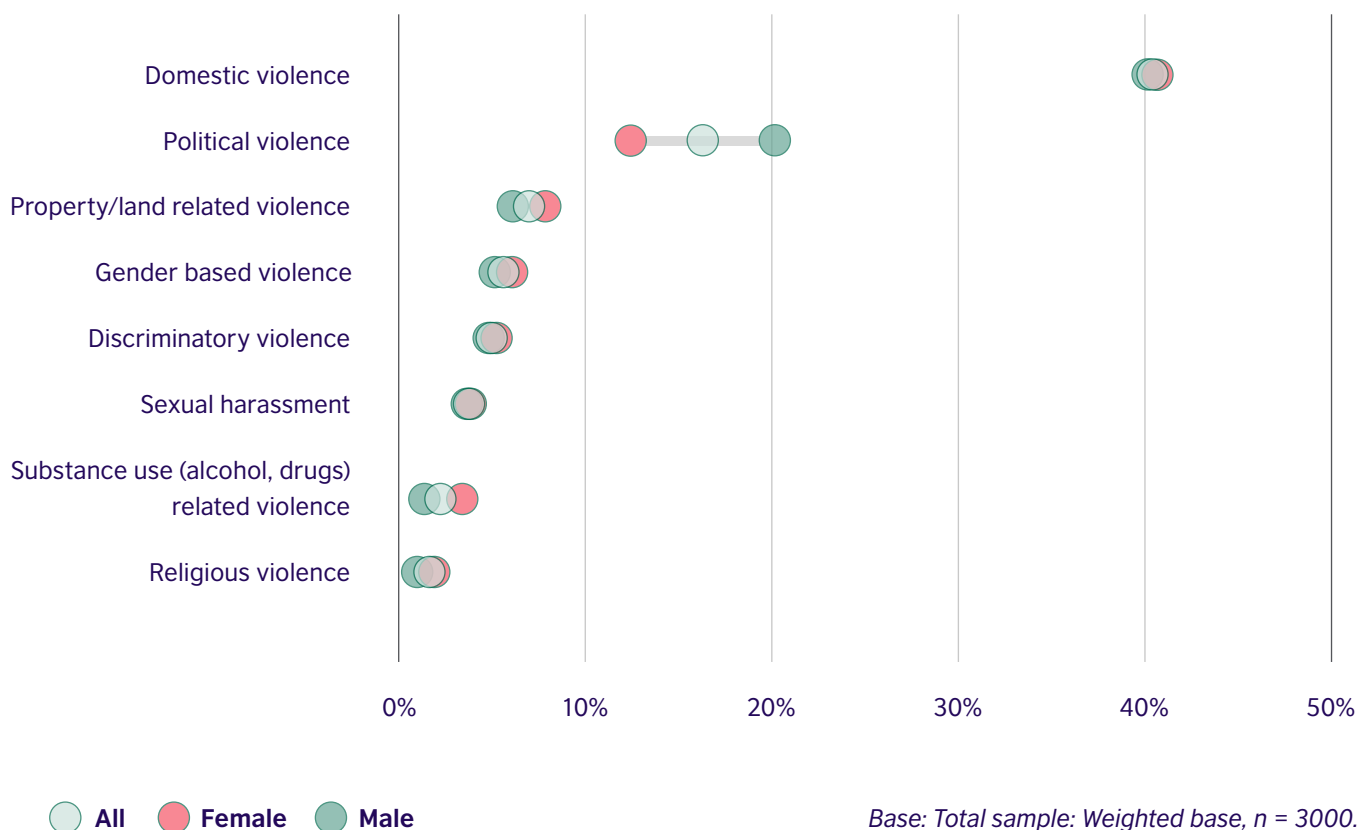
1.5.3. Young women in Bangladesh face considerable obstacles due to gender-based violence, experienced both in professional and domestic settings

However, it is clear that discriminatory norms and gender-based violence (GBV) continue to pose significant challenges to women’s empowerment in Bangladesh²⁸, despite some progress in reducing ‘missing women’ and increasing female education and economic participation.²⁹ When asked what the most common source of violence in community, four in ten pointed to domestic violence (Figure 11). When asked about violence experienced, 27 per cent of all respondents have experienced domestic violence, but women aged 31-35 (33 per cent) were the most likely

to report experiencing domestic violence. While a lower level of people experienced domestic violence than those that believed domestic violence was the common source of violence in the community, it nevertheless was the choice selected by the most respondents first in both cases.

Workplace sexual violence is also quite a common experience among workers in factory and domestic work settings. The qualitative research pointed to a wider culture of sexual violence and harassment against women. In the discussions, the young women referred frequently to being subject to ‘eve-teasing’, a euphemism used throughout South Asia for public sexual harassment or molestation of women,³⁰ reflecting on how this issue is becoming increasingly widespread and impacting their public lives.

Figure 11. Percentage of most common sources of violence in local communities.



²⁸ Concern Worldwide (2022) reports that 25% of Bangladeshi women and girls experience physical or sexual violence by a current or former partner within a year of marriage. Furthermore, Concern Worldwide (2022) found that 87% of married women in Bangladesh have experienced GBV in their lifetime, with incidents exacerbated during COVID-19 lockdowns.

²⁹ World Economic Forum. (2021). *Global Gender Gap Report 2021*.

“Eve-teasing is increasing... There are ‘Kishor Gangs’ who gather in the narrow lanes in the evenings, engaging in eve-teasing and harassing women, it means we cannot go outside.”

While women are more likely to experience gender-based violence, there is very low reporting in the Next Generation Bangladesh Survey with only three per cent of women reporting experiencing sexual violence. This low level of reporting in the survey points to the **wider reluctance to report among young women**, fuelled by societal pressure, patriarchal norms, and in the case of conservative or lower-income families, a lack of understanding regarding the issue.

“Young women are not allowed to report for the sake of the reputation of the family. And the young men are afraid of losing their manhood if they share the incidence of discrimination with them. The patriarchal structure in society is the root cause, we have so many problems, but we are not ready to say anything against it.” (Female respondent, 25-29, Dhaka, employed full time, Bachelor’s).

“If a girl is harassed, she’s often blamed for it because of societal expectations regarding her behaviour and appearance. People question why she was out, why she wasn’t covered properly, or why she was out in the evening. Girls are unfairly blamed for everything while boys escape scrutiny.” (Female respondents in a focus group, 25-29, Chattogram).

Similarly, recent qualitative research from BIGD on domestic work and the agro-processing sector found most women to have experienced sexual abuse/violence of some sort, but a deep stigma to speak against this experience, often using indirect languages to talk about sexual violence with their peers.³¹

Young women also pointed to the sense of **husbands’ entitlement and dominance** within marital relationships that contributes to the normalisation

of domestic violence. It was reported that some husbands believe they have the right to physically harm their wives, often justifying their actions by claiming to provide for them. Fear and hesitation of victims, particularly women, in seeking help or taking action against abuse are linked to concerns about potential escalation and the safety of their children.

“Many husbands claim they can do whatever they want and are not afraid of anyone. They believe they have the right to beat their wives because they provide for them. They express such sentiments, which is why we hesitate to take action. We fear it could escalate into a significant problem, especially considering we have children.” (Female respondent, 30-35, Chattogram, victim of domestic violence).

This underscores the urgent need for **addressing the normalisation of violence within marital relationships and implementing effective measures to protect victims** and hold perpetrators accountable. Reluctance to report is further complicated by significant challenges with the legal protection and recourse for domestic violence victims.

“Even if the husbands beating their wives are taken by police, they behave similarly again when they are back.” (Female respondent, 18-24, Chattogram, victim of domestic violence).

Though Bangladesh introduced the Domestic Violence Prevention and Protection Act (DVPPA) in 2010, after long struggles by university students and other feminist groups, its implementation has been regarded as slow and weak.³² **Societal norms of trivialising domestic violence, victim blaming and shaming has created significant resistance among police and the justice system to implement DVPPA**, manifested in deliberate inaction, downplaying of domestic violence incidents, de-prioritisation, and rather a preference for traditional conflict resolution processes.³³ The case study in Annex 3 of the experience of violence against women in Chattogram, provides insights into the challenges faced by women, but also the solutions identified to further the safety and empowerment of women across Bangladesh.

³⁰ Mowly, R., & Bahfen, N. (2020). The ebb and flow of ‘eve-teasing’ in the news: Front page coverage of street harassment of women in Bangladesh. *Pacific Journalism Review*, 26(2), 279-290.

³¹ Nazneen, S., & Huq, L. (2023). Domestic workers’ agency against workplace sexual harassment: The role of social norms in Bangladesh. *Development Policy Review*, 41(4), e12702..

³² Sultan, M., & Mahpara, P. (2024). ‘It’s a Family Matter’: Inaction and Denial of Domestic Violence. *IDS Bulletin*, 55(1).

³³ Sultan, M., & Mahpara, P. (2024). ‘It’s a Family Matter’: Inaction and Denial of Domestic Violence. *IDS Bulletin*, 55(1).

1.6. Youth challenges

Headline findings:

- Societal challenges in Bangladesh vary by urbanisation, gender, education, and socio-economic factors, impacting communities differently based on location and gender.
- The primary concern across Bangladesh, notably in Dhaka (48 per cent), is the high cost of living. Recent cost increases without corresponding wage adjustments have left many young people struggling financially.
- Substance abuse and access to food/water are significant issues, with urban-rural disparities. For example, high substance abuse levels reflect responses to macroeconomic challenges, especially affecting young rural men facing limited job opportunities and mental health difficulties. Whereas young women are disproportionately affected by issues like food/water scarcity.
- Concerns about the issue of early marriage vary by region, with only ten per cent of young people citing it as a top issue. The highest concern is in the Mymensingh division.

1.6.1. Understanding societal and communal challenges: a blend of contemporary issues and ongoing concerns from the past five years affect young people

High cost of living was the most common pressing issue identified in young people's local communities (39 per cent), followed by a lack of well-suited employment opportunities (18 per cent) and early marriage (ten per cent).

Young people's perceptions of the most pressing issues facing the local community vary by social class, gender, and Division (Figure 12). Interestingly, the highest social class group (56 per cent) and men (43 per cent) were more concerned by the high cost of living than the lowest social class group (37 per cent) and women (35 per cent). In contrast, the lowest social class group (ten per cent) and women (11 per cent) were more worried about early marriage than the highest social class (three per cent) and men (eight per cent).

Figure 12. Most pressing issue in local community today.*

What is the most pressing issue in your local community? by region	Barisal	Chattogram	Dhaka	Khulna	Mymensingh	Rajshahi	Rangpur	Sylhet
High cost of living	31%	31%↓	48%↑	35%	36%	37%	41%	42%
Lack of well-suited employment opportunities	23%	19%	14%↓	18%	10%↓	23%	24%↑	15%
Climate change and environment related shocks	5%	6%	5%	7%	3%	6%	5%	5%
Early marriage	8%	8%	7%	15%↑	18%↑	9%	10%	8%
Violence against women and girls	8%	7%↑	2%↓	2%	5%	4%	3%	4%
Discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity	1%	2%	1%	1%	1%	3%	1%	1%
Lack of political engagement	6%↑	4%	2%	2%	4%	0%↓	2%	2%
Lack of access to social services	4%	5%	4%	5%	4%	4%	3%	5%

Base: Total sample: Weighted base, n = 3000. *Arrow indicates statistical significance.

Moving on to issues that have had a negative impact on youth in the last five years, substance abuse, access to food and/or water and poor-quality housing are salient issues among many young people (Figure 13). These societal issues are multifaceted, varying by urbanity, gender and educational attainment, and socio-economic status. They influence various communities differently based on location (urban or rural) and gender.

Figure 13. Challenges with a negative impact in the last five years.



The difference between urban and rural populations is significant. While one quarter (25 per cent) of the sample have dealt with drug/alcohol abuse, **seven per cent more rural men (35 per cent) suffered from drug and alcohol abuse compared to their urban counterparts (28 per cent).** Lack of access to food and water had been experienced by 31 per cent of urban respondents, with young people from peri-urban communities more likely to report lack of access to healthcare as shown below. **Gender dynamics also influence experience of societal challenges** as young women are most affected by lack of access to food/water (26 per cent for rural women and 31 per cent for urban women). This challenge is especially acute amongst those with low levels of educational attainment (less than primary). This is closely followed by lack of access to housing (19 per cent), drug/alcohol abuse (17 per cent) and marriage at a young age (17 per cent).

There are also significant variations by Division. Young people in Rangpur (37 per cent) and Dhaka (34 per cent) are significantly more likely to have been negatively affected by lack of access to food and/or water, and poor-quality housing in the last five years. There are over 100,000 people living in the 57 slums found throughout Rangpur where WASH (Water, Sanitation, Hygiene) conditions are poor. Indeed, in these settlements 7-8 households are often sharing a single, unsanitary toilet; most drinking water comes from tube wells; and over 15 per cent have no toilet facilities.³⁴ Similarly, Dhaka's rapid population growth over the past decades poses a wide variety of challenges for sustainable urban planning and management. In particular, lack of investment in necessary infrastructure for providing basic residential services such as water supply, electricity, waste management and public transportation.

1.6.2. Drug and alcohol abuse: young people recognise the detrimental effects but underscore that it is driven by systemic factors

High levels (25 per cent) of substance abuse reveal youth reactions to the country's macroeconomic challenges. Poverty and limited employment prospects have left many youths, especially young rural men, idle. Our research suggests that this has led to social isolation and depression, driving young people to addiction.

“They don't know how to cope up with their situation so that they often lose their confidence in themselves and turn to alcohol and drugs.” (Male respondent, 18-24, Barisal, employed full time).

Please see Annex 2: Deep Dive 2 for further detail on drug and alcohol abuse and systemic causes.

1.6.3. Early marriage: increased awareness but the practice persists

Early marriage and discriminatory norms present significant barriers to gender equality and women's empowerment in Bangladesh. According to UNICEF (2020), **51 per cent of Bangladeshi women aged 20-24 were married before their 18th birthday**, with 16 per cent married before their 15th birthday.³⁶ **Prevalence and concern of early marriage appears to vary by division, where only ten per cent of the full sample reported early marriage as the most pressing issue in their local community, with Mymensingh reporting the highest concern.** The issue of early marriage is explored in further detail in (Annex 2: Deep Dive 3), while the issue specifically in Mymensingh is explored in Case Study 02 in Annex 3.

1.6.4. Young people, irrespective of urban or rural location and gender, worry about the cost of living and job prospects, yet they still perceive their lives as better than their parents'

The **recent increase in cost of living and lack of commensurate increase in wages has left most young people struggling** across socio-economic status. Over half of those in the upper social class (56 per cent) reported high cost of living as the most pressing issues, compared to 37 per cent of lower social class and 42 per cent of middle social class youth. In 2023, Bangladesh experienced a significant surge in inflation, marking it as the year of inflation in the country. Data from the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS) reveals a sustained inflation rate of over nine per cent across 2023, with food inflation peaking at 12.6 per cent, representing the highest level seen in at least a decade.³⁷

³⁴ Nutrition in City Ecosystems. (2021). City overview on Food and Nutrition of Rangpur City, Bangladesh.

³⁵ Brouwer, R., Sharmin, D. F., Elliott, S., Liu, J., & Khan, M. R. (2023). Costs and benefits of improving water and sanitation in slums and non-slum neighbourhoods in Dhaka, a fast-growing mega-city. *Ecological Economics*, 207, 107763

³⁶ The Daily Star. (2023). 2023: *The year of Inflation*. www.thedailystar.net/opinion/views/news/2023-was-the-year-inflation-3505321

³⁷ The Daily Star. (2023). 2023: *The year of Inflation*. www.thedailystar.net/opinion/views/news/2023-was-the-year-inflation-3505321

This is coupled with the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic which exacerbated existing economic woes and accelerated economic recession and unemployment. Between 2018 to 2020, the rate of those living under the poverty line doubled.³⁸ Now, young people suggest that many Bangladeshis have been forced to deplete their savings to meet their daily needs, with uncertainty looming over when they can replenish them. This economic instability further compounds the challenges faced by the population.

Disparities in job sectors between those employed in government jobs and those in the private sector have also been highlighted. While individuals in government jobs are generally managing well, those in the private sector are grappling with stagnant salaries and job insecurity. Redundancies and increased work pressure have become common, exacerbating financial struggles, and leaving many individuals with limited options for improvement.

“Those in private jobs are struggling because companies aren’t raising salaries. Sometimes, they lay off five employees and retain three who work under duress. I can’t afford to leave Dhaka if my salary isn’t increased.” (Male respondent, 25-29, Dhaka, internal migrant from rural area to Dhaka for employment opportunity).

“In this socio-economic context, living has been somewhat challenging due to inflation. From Bangladesh’s perspective, people aren’t earning the desired income. For instance, a job that pays ten thousand takas in Bangladesh would be valued at 20 thousand takas in other areas. This devaluation of workers is a significant issue. Additionally, the inflation of goods exacerbates the situation.” (Young man, 18-24, NEET, Dhaka, Bachelor’s).

The soaring costs of rent and utilities, particularly in urban areas and expenses often surpassing the means of many young people makes basic necessities a luxury. Additionally, rural youth who migrate to urban areas for employment opportunities are left without a support system, facing heightened difficulties in establishing themselves in such an environment.

Figure 14. Impact of cost of living by urbanity.



³⁸ Institute of Development Studies. (2024). 'Being New Poor in Bangladesh Coping Strategies, Constraints, and Trajectories', www.ids.ac.uk/publications/being-new-poor-in-bangladesh-coping-strategies-constraints-and-trajectories

“Life here in Dhaka has its challenges. While I came here with dreams of making a positive change, reality sets in with the critical environment, weather, and pace of the city. Living a decent life here is a luxury, especially considering the high rent and utility costs that are beyond the means of many Bachelor’s or lower-income individuals. Moreover, living here as newcomers without relatives or a support system is tough.” (Male respondent, 25-29, Dhaka, internal migrant from rural area to Dhaka for employment opportunity).

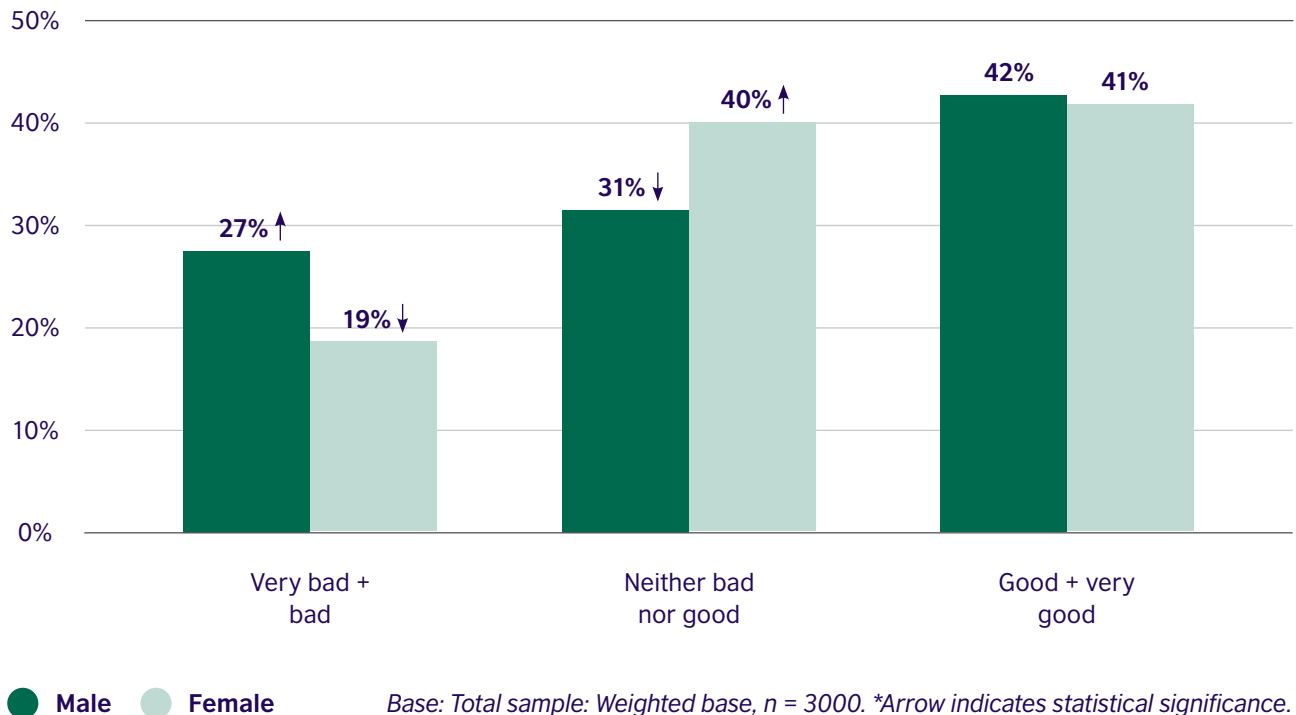
The impact of the cost of living differs by locality. Urban youth are more likely to report negative impacts on housing conditions (34 per cent), whereas rural youth point to negative impacts on diet (32 per cent) or mental health (ten per cent) (Figure 14).

Young people also emphasised that, unlike the past when individuals could focus on completing their studies before entering the job market, many now find themselves compelled to balance work and studies simultaneously. This shift reflects the evolving economic landscape and the growing pressure on individuals to secure employment amidst challenging circumstances.

Despite these challenges, most young people (57 per cent) still believe their lives are better than that of their parents, with 42 per cent of respondents rating the current standard of living to be good (good + very good). Young women are more likely to respond ambivalently to the current standard of living, with four in ten noting it to be ‘neither bad nor good’ as shown in Figure 15.

Case Study 04 in Annex 3 provides further insight into the impact of the cost of living on the urban youth of Dhaka, and those who have internally migrated in pursuit of economic opportunity.

Figure 15. Rate of standard of living by gender.*



1.7. Aspirations and the future

Headline findings:

- Young people are optimistic about their future, particularly their future careers.
- The highest rates of pessimism were towards ‘my country’. Young people in the higher social classes were most likely to report pessimistically on the future of the country, with only four in ten higher social class respondents reporting optimism in the country.
- Optimism about Bangladesh’s future has declined by nine per cent since Next Generation Bangladesh 2015. This has been attributed to factors like political instability and the dominance of government job aspirations, fostering a sense of limited opportunities and intense competition, hindering personal and professional fulfilment.

1.7.1. Young people are optimistic about their future, particularly on the individual level

Overall, young people are mostly optimistic about the future on all key indicators, but they are most optimistic about future careers (Figure 16). Young rural women are the most likely to be positive about their future career, and men more likely to be pessimistic about their future career and quality of life, and more positive about the local community. The highest rate of pessimism across the sample is towards ‘my country’ (29 per cent) as shown below in Figure 16. Young people in the higher social classes were most likely to report pessimistically on the future of the country, with only four in ten higher social class respondents reporting optimism in the country.

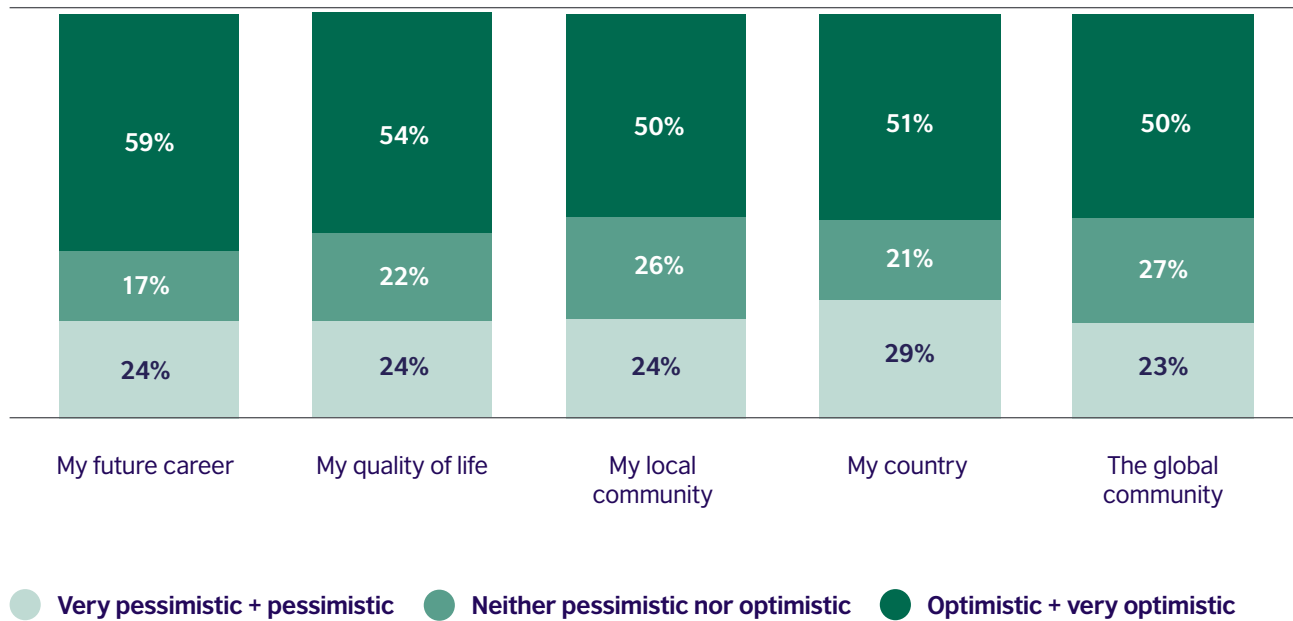
Optimism in the future of Bangladesh has dropped by nine per cent since Next Generation Bangladesh 2015. When probed, young people attributed this diluted sense of optimism to various interconnected factors. Political instability is a primary concern, overshadowing the country’s prospects for stability and progress. Additionally, the pervasive emphasis on securing government jobs as the primary path to success contributes to a sense of limited opportunities

and heightened competition among young people. This singular focus fosters a feeling of being trapped in a relentless rat race, hindering broader avenues for personal and professional fulfilment.

“The feeling of being in a rat race can contribute to this feeling of pessimism.”
(Female respondent, 25-29, Dhaka, employed full time, Bachelor’s).

Moreover, **the education system is seen as inadequate in preparing young people for the evolving demands of the modern world, further dampening hopes for socio-economic advancement.** Environmental degradation adds to these challenges, posing significant threats to both livelihoods and the overall sustainability of the nation. Economic turmoil, coupled with political instability, compounds the prevailing pessimism with rising unemployment rates heightening concerns about the country’s future trajectory. These multifaceted issues underscore the need for comprehensive reforms and concerted efforts to address the root causes of pessimism and foster a more hopeful outlook for Bangladesh’s future.

Figure 16. What is your outlook on...



Base: Total sample: Weighted base, n = 3000.

“I am personally optimistic, as I feel like I have the skills to have a better future here. Speaking about Bangladeshi youth, they might feel pessimistic as there is a lack of job opportunities here, and most of them are only aiming for government jobs.”

(Male respondent, 25-29, Dhaka, employed full time, Master’s).

“In my view, many young people have big dreams of getting a stable government job or moving abroad for better prospects. But when these dreams don’t come true, they can feel really down and hopeless. It’s like they hit a wall and don’t know what to do next.” (Male respondent, 30-35, Dhaka, employed full time, PhD).

Despite these challenges, optimism in the future is evident, especially regarding anticipated changes in the education sector driven by government initiatives. Young people in focus groups expressed hope that these reforms will bring positive transformations to the entire education system.

Additionally, there is a shared belief in the potential for preventing ‘brain drain’ through fostering a supportive environment for youth-led business ventures and startups. Despite recognising existing challenges, such as unemployment, there is a prevailing sense of hope and confidence in Bangladesh’s future development and progress.

“I am expecting significant changes in the education sector as the Bangladesh government has taken new initiatives to reshape the entire education system, and I am very hopeful about the change.” (Male respondent, 30-35, Chattogram, employed full time, Master’s).

“I know there are a lot of problems in Bangladesh, but there has been a lot of development too. And I feel the youth should be supported and encouraged, especially in terms of employment.” (Female respondent, 18-24, Dhaka, employed full time, Bachelor’s).

Conclusion and Recommendations

Young people's lives in Bangladesh encompass a blend of traditional values and contemporary preferences across various aspects of their beliefs and priorities. They cherish traditional Bangladeshi values and prioritise close family and personal relationships as fundamental pillars of their social lives, while also valuing creativity and innovation on a personal level. This duality is further reflected in their preference for social media as a source of news, offering an alternative to traditional media for information and opportunities. However, structural challenges persist in Bangladesh where a preference for traditional values over contemporary ones, especially in education curriculum and societal norms for women, is causing disillusionment among young people. Furthermore, challenges, such as disparities in access to technology, discrimination, and gender-based violence—particularly affecting young women—highlight the intersection of gender and youth perceptions, urging comprehensive action to foster holistic social cohesion among all. Nonetheless, they remain largely optimistic about their future prospects, not allowing these challenges to dictate their outlook on life.

Detailed recommendations can be found in Chapter 4: 'Conclusions and Recommendations', which include actions to:

- 1. Strengthen community leadership:** Encourage genuine engagement between local leaders and youth, showcasing successful models like those in Barisal, which can aid in this effort.
- 2. Tackle gender disparities:** Implement targeted programmes to enhance technology access for rural women, ensuring equal opportunities for all.
- 3. Expand digital infrastructure:** Implement initiatives to improve digital access and connectivity in rural areas, encouraging private-public partnership.
- 4. Review Domestic Violence Prevention and Protection Act:** Assess effectiveness, pinpoint obstacles, and suggest improvements with input from stakeholders.
- 5. Promote youth creativity:** Collaborate with CSOs, youth-led organisations, and government bodies to enhance co-curricular activities like debating, sports, culture, performing arts, creative industries, arts and literature alongside academic classes.



This duality is further reflected in their preference for social media as a source of news, offering an alternative to traditional media for information and opportunities.

Chapter 2

Pathways

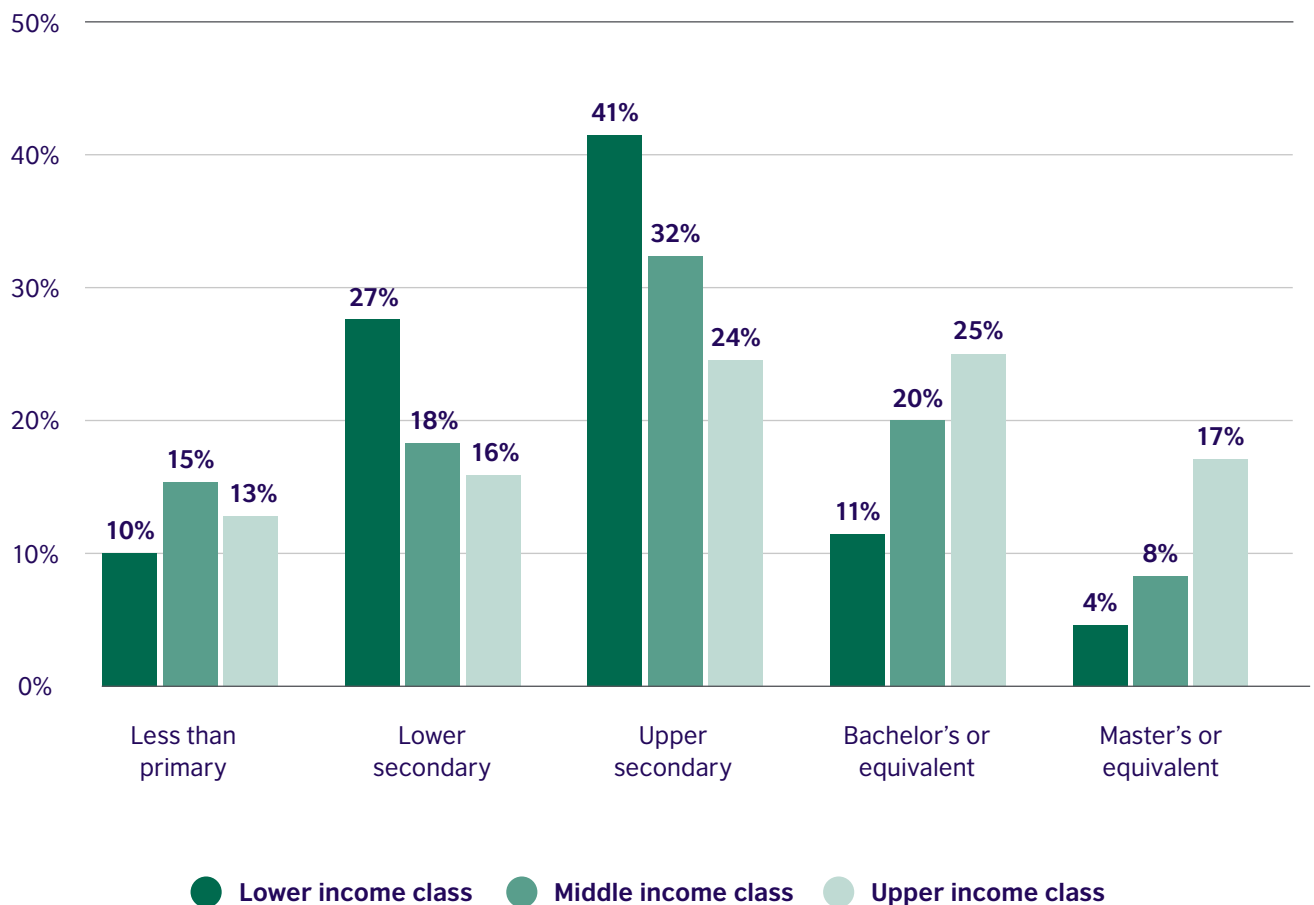


Summary: Education and employment

Education

Bangladesh has made significant strides in expanding access to education, achieving near universal enrolment for primary education. However, gaps in access persist for young people in rural areas, regions like Rangpur, those in lower socioeconomic groups, and young women, particularly in attaining higher educational degrees.

Educational attainment by income class:





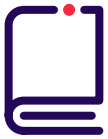
49%

Feel teaching quality should be improved



16%

Feel student attitude should be improved



11%

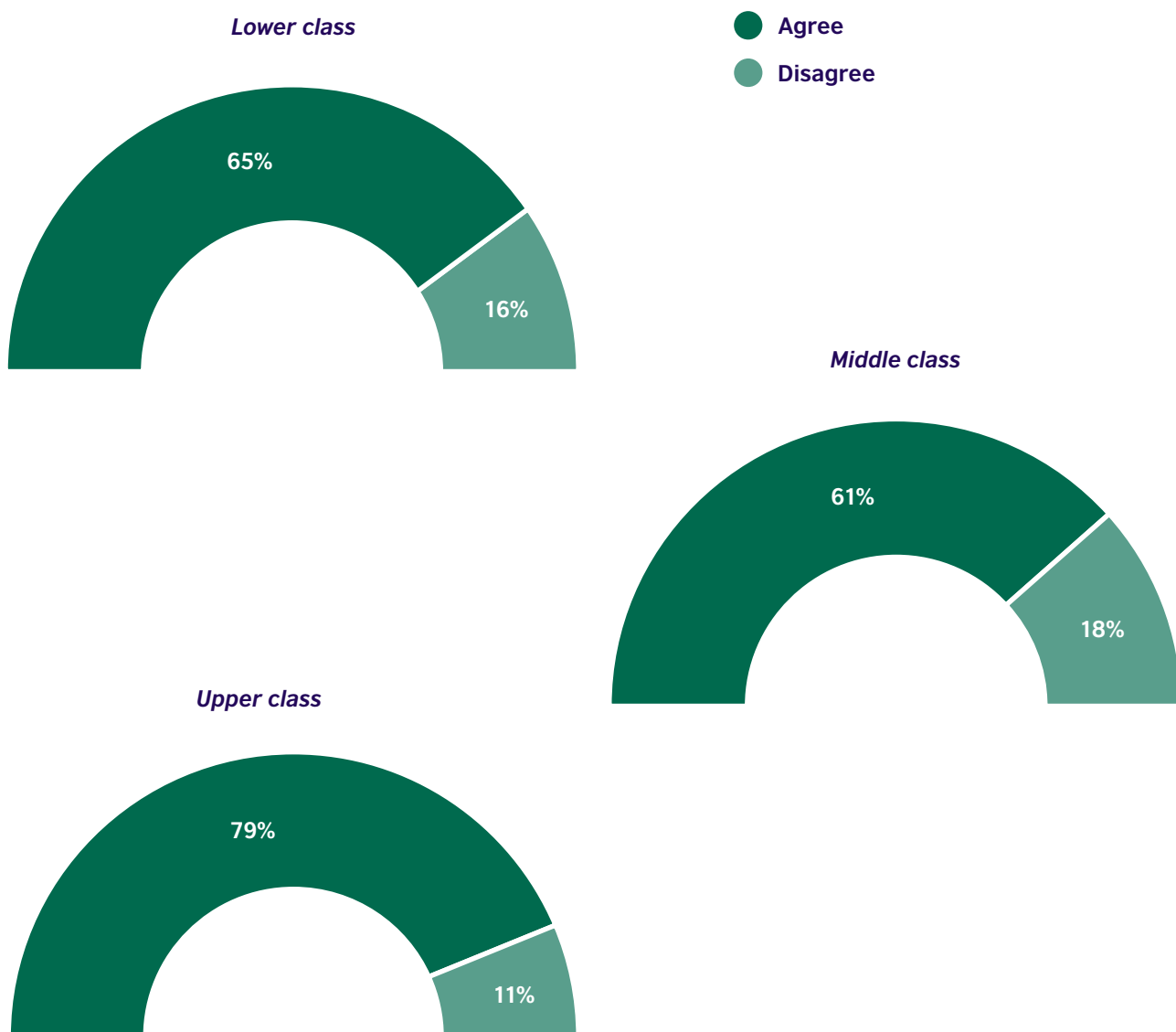
Feel the curriculum is not relevant

Six in ten young people believe the quality of education is good, and 53 per cent believe it is improving, with optimism being particularly strong among rural youth, and those aged 18-24. However, there remains a consensus on areas requiring improvement. Young people in Chittagong, Dhaka, Rangpur, and urban areas are particularly concerned in the quality of Bangladesh's education system.

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.

The education system has created a prepared workforce, but challenges exist in aligning academic knowledge and skills with market demands for formal employment, especially in urban areas. There is an increasing appetite for technical/vocational education. Two-thirds (65 per cent) of young people believe it is more important than formal education, particularly in Barisal, Sylhet, and Rangpur, and among those in higher socio-economic groups.

Among all young people, regardless of income group, technical education is consistently recognised as the pressing need of the hour over formal education:



Employment

Since 2017, the rate of NEET youth has increased by 11 per cent. Key barriers to youth employment include corruption/nepotism (37 per cent), hiring discrimination (15 per cent) and lack of family support (ten per cent), with gender, locality, and income class impacting prioritisation. Rural NEET women face challenges balancing family and work, with 17 per cent citing it as a major barrier, compared to eight per cent of their male counterparts. Conversely, societal pressures driving young men to excel in careers contribute to mental health issues and NEET status.

Low wages (60 per cent) and long working hours (47 per cent) dominate concerns for employed youth navigating a largely informal job market concentrated in lower-skilled, lower-paid roles. 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.

In response to limited opportunities, young people increasingly turn to social media and digital freelancing for skills development and employment.



6 in 10 cite 'low wages' as the biggest challenge for young people.

International migration and youth voice in the community and politics

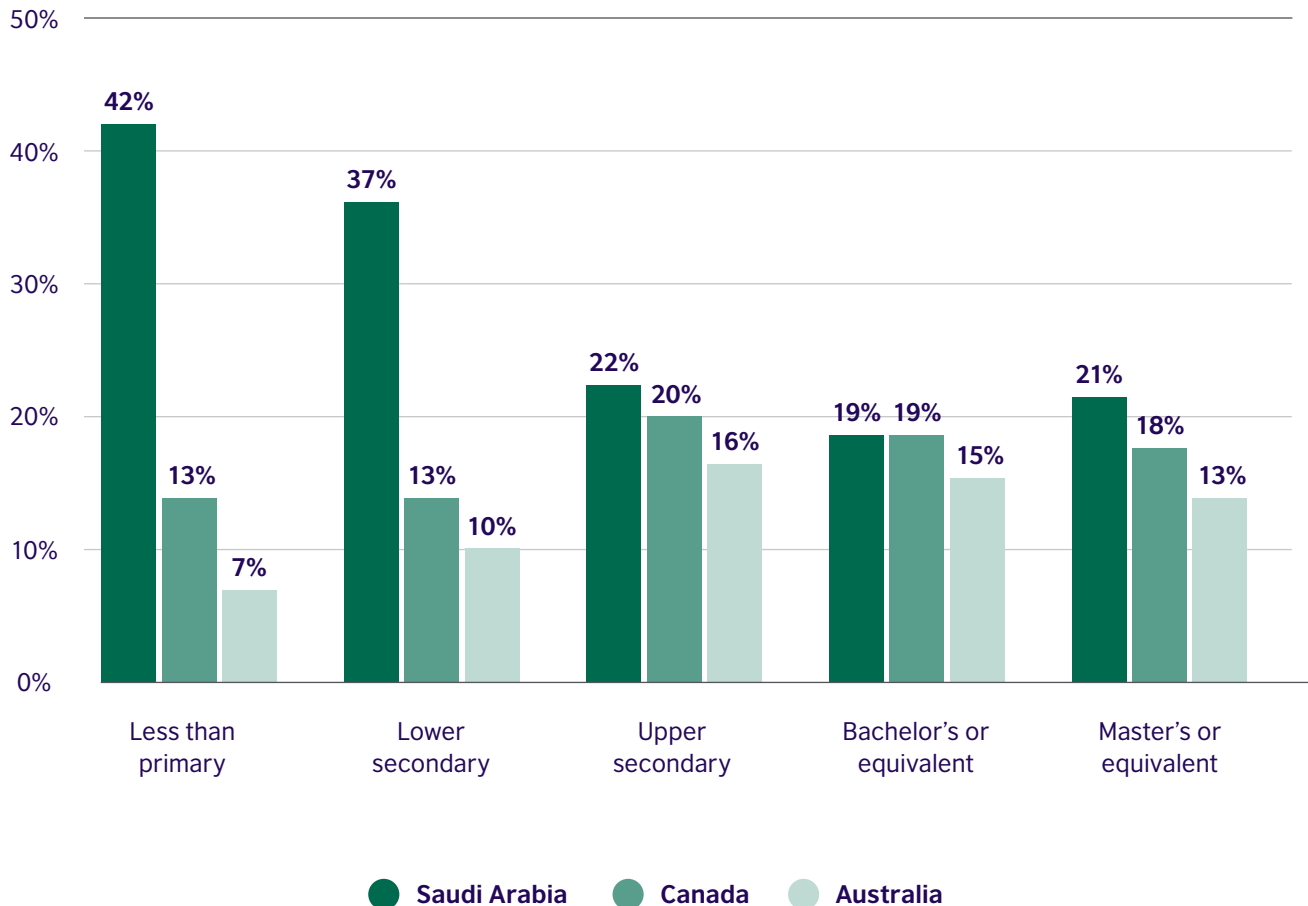
International migration

Over half of young people (55 per cent) are open to international migration as a potential economic solution, with more young men (64 per cent) willing to relocate compared to women (46 per cent).

Saudi Arabia is the most appealing destination, especially for those with lower education attainment, mainly due to religious appeal and economic prospects, followed by Canada and Australia. Canada is increasingly preferred by those with upper secondary education and above.

Young people generally view migration positively as a chance to represent Bangladesh abroad and contribute to the country's development upon return and through remittances. In 2023 alone, migrants sent back \$21.9 billion through official channels. However, concerns exist around exploitation of migrants, fraudulent recruitment practices especially targeting young women, and human rights issues in destination countries like Saudi Arabia that have religious appeal.

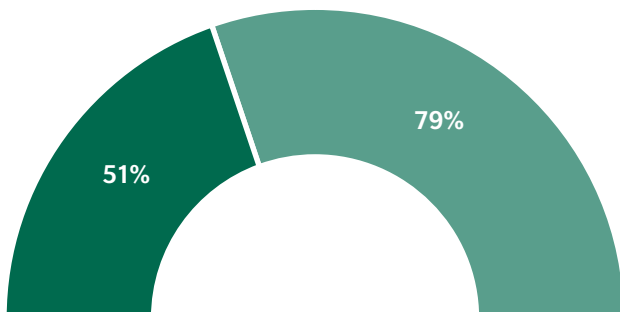
Top three attractive countries by educational attainment:



Youth voice in politics and the community

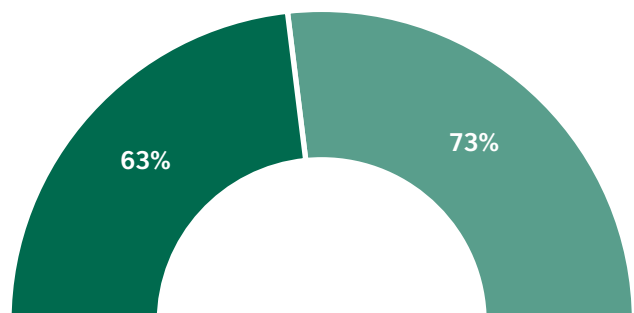
High levels of distrust (58 per cent) and disengagement (65 per cent very unengaged) in politics exist, stemming from lack of representation, perceived corruption (73 per cent), and fear of reprisals (six per cent). There is a significant relationship between engagement with politics with gender, educational attainment, and region.

Disengagement with politics by gender:



- Male
- Female

Disengagement with politics by educational attainment:



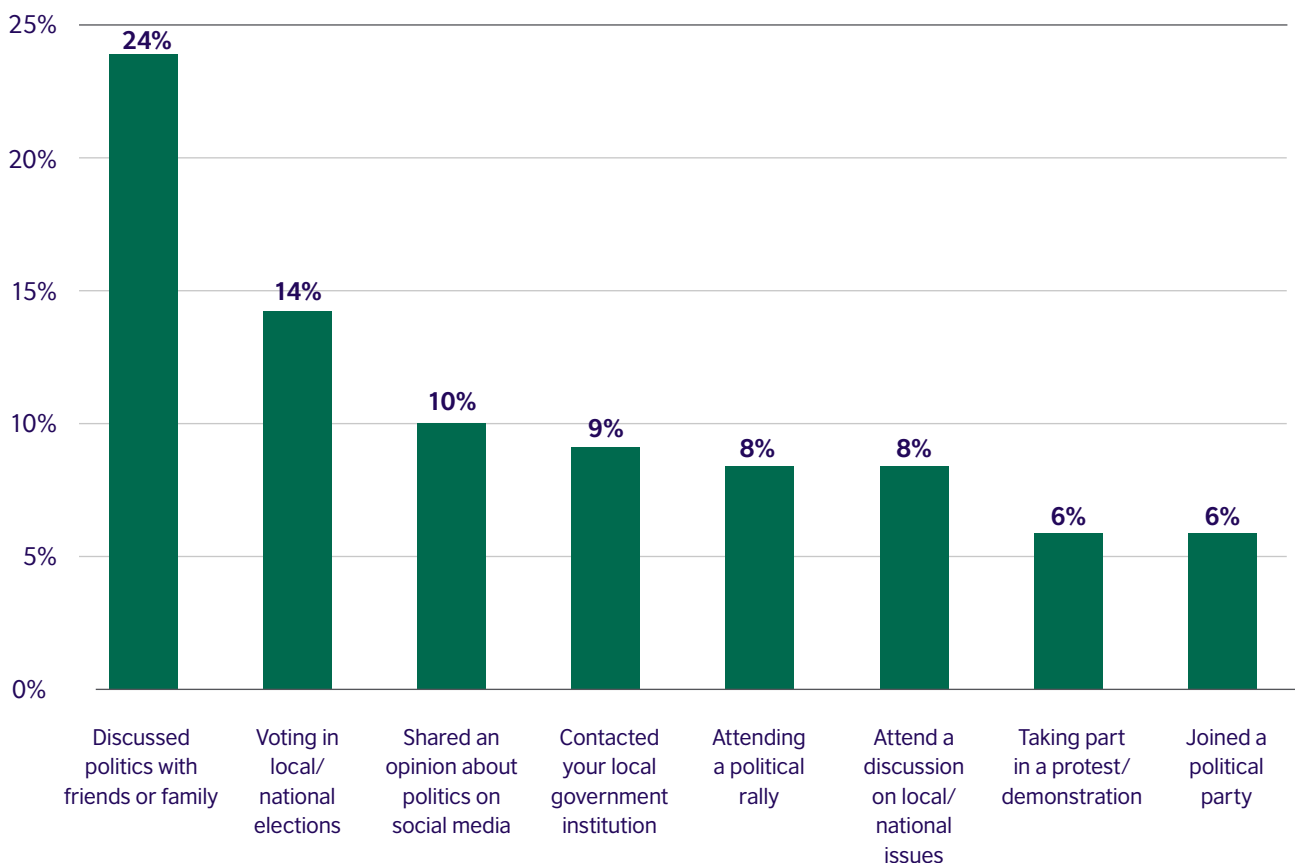
- Master's or equivalent
- Less than primary education

However, young people demonstrate commitment to Bangladesh's progress. 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).

Over half (58 per cent) engaged in political activities in the last 12 months, with 48 per cent of young people engaging informally, like discussing politics with friends/family (24 per cent), sharing opinions on social media (ten per cent), and participating in protests (six per cent).

Young people feel a strong sense of community belonging (57 per cent) but report a lack of trust in local leaders and inaction on addressing local issues, eroding youth confidence in local leadership. To increase engagement, young people need an enabling environment that values their voices, makes participation more accessible, and provides a safe space for them to engage.

Political activities undertaken in the last 12 months:





Climate change and recommendations

Youth voice in climate action

Around 60 per cent of young people are concerned about climate change’s impact. The extent of concern for climate change varies by region and socio-economic status, but only five per cent of young people see it as the most important world issue, indicating a gap between concern and prioritisation.

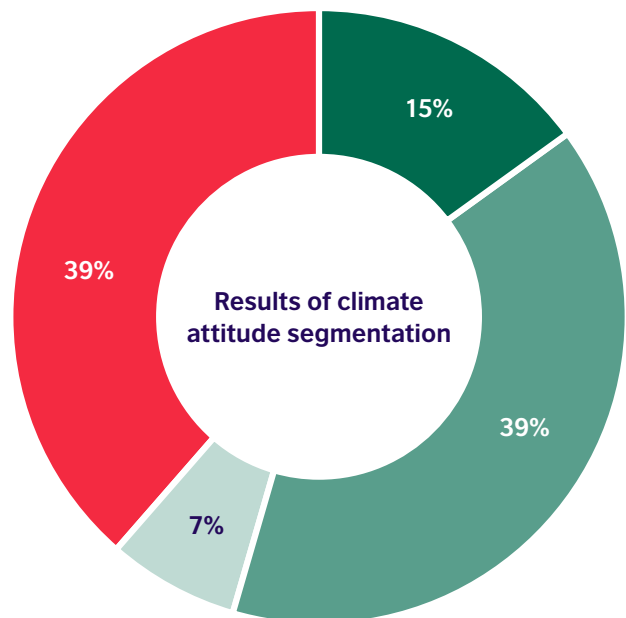
While concern is widespread, around half of young people in a recent UNICEF survey could explain climate change/global warming, highlighting the need for education and awareness efforts. Just under three-quarters (73 per cent) of young people in the Next Generation Bangladesh survey pointed to a need of education on the risk of climate change (45 per cent) and ways to take action (28 per cent). A further quarter (26 per cent) reported needing training on technical knowledge and skills to enable the use of green technology.

Four distinct youth segments exist based on climate attitudes/behaviours: Optimistic Climate Activists (15 per cent), Climate Advocates (40 per cent), Climate Anxious Pessimists (seven per cent), and Climate Indifferent (39 per cent).

Tailored strategies are needed to effectively engage each segment, ranging from empowerment through action to education campaigns recognising unique segment characteristics.



Young people in Khulna reported the highest concerns with climate change



- Optimistic climate activists
- Climate advocates
- Climate anxious pessimists
- Climate indifferent

Recommendations

Overall, the findings reveal Bangladesh's young people as a pragmatic, career-driven generation deeply invested in the country's progress despite facing systemic barriers across education, employment, and political engagement. Closing gaps, enhancing representation, and tapping into their strong sense of identity and commitment through inclusive policies can amplify their voices as key drivers of positive change. Below is a snapshot of the recommendations derived from the insights presented in Chapter 2 – they can be found in further detail in Chapter 4 'Conclusions and recommendations'.

- 1. Develop teacher training:** Focus on modern teaching methodologies and essential soft skills integration, particularly in regions like Chittagong and Dhaka with concerns about teaching quality.
- 2. Expand access to technical and vocational education programmes:** Build partnerships with industry leaders, vocational training institutes, and development sector actors, particularly focused on regions like Dhaka, Khulna, Rangpur, Sylhet, and Barisal.
- 3. Implement gender-responsive employment policies:** Address barriers faced by young women, including social stigma and family responsibilities, through cross-collaborative efforts between government ministries, CSOs, NGOs, and private sector industries.
- 4. Integrate civic education into school curricula:** Equip young people at secondary and higher education levels with knowledge and skills for active citizenship, including critical thinking and legal knowledge for initiating change.
- 5. Foster genuine interaction between local leaders and young people:** Demonstrate sincere interest in youth issues and involve them in community matters, amplifying successful case studies of effective community leadership.
- 6. Integrate climate change education:** Offer vocational training programs, within the school curricula, on green technology to reach a wide audience of young people.

2. Pathways

The following chapter examines pathways for youth development and the current barriers in place. This includes access to education, exploring the barriers to education and efforts to improve access for all youth, employment opportunities and avenues for civic engagement with a gendered NEET lens, youth voice across various domains of political and civic engagement, and climate change.

2.1. Education

Headline findings:

- Bangladesh has made significant strides in expanding access to education over the past decade, achieving near universal enrolment for primary education. However, gaps persist. Of notable concern is lower levels of educational attainment among young people in peri-urban and rural areas, regions like Rangpur, those in lower socio-economic groups and young women.
- Despite overarching positivity towards the education system, particularly among rural youth and those aged 18-24, there remains a consensus on areas requiring improvement. Young people in Chattogram, Dhaka and Rangpur, and urban areas are particularly concerned in the quality of Bangladesh's education system.
- Young people value education, yet significant systemic barriers, including mismatches with labour market needs, neglect of soft skills in schools, and limited educational resources hinder access to employment opportunities. There is also a gap in the learning of languages. Most young people only have an elementary understanding of English (44 per cent) and just under a quarter of young people (23 per cent) have no ability to speak or understand English at all.
- The education system has created a prepared workforce, but for jobs in the formal sector, challenges persist in aligning academic knowledge with market needs. Employers in the formal sector often struggle to recruit fresh graduates lacking practical experience and whose academic knowledge does not meet market demands.
- Bangladesh's young people are increasingly favouring career paths over completing education, with 65 per cent prioritising careers. This reflects a pragmatic outlook on employment and economic factors. There is also a rising acknowledgment of the significance of technical education, favoured by 65 per cent of youth, especially in Barisal, Sylhet, and Rangpur.

2.1.1. Access to higher education remains an issue, despite significant strides made by the Government to close the gap

Bangladesh has made significant strides in expanding access to education over the past decade, achieving near universal enrolment for primary education. However, to build a prosperous nation, prioritising the education sector is crucial and the Government of Bangladesh is actively pursuing transformative changes aimed at enhancing the quality of education at all levels.³⁹

Efforts include the nationalisation of hundreds of secondary schools and colleges, along with the transformation of private secondary schools into model institutions where government schools are lacking. Furthermore, significant investments have been made in constructing buildings for post-graduate colleges.⁴⁰

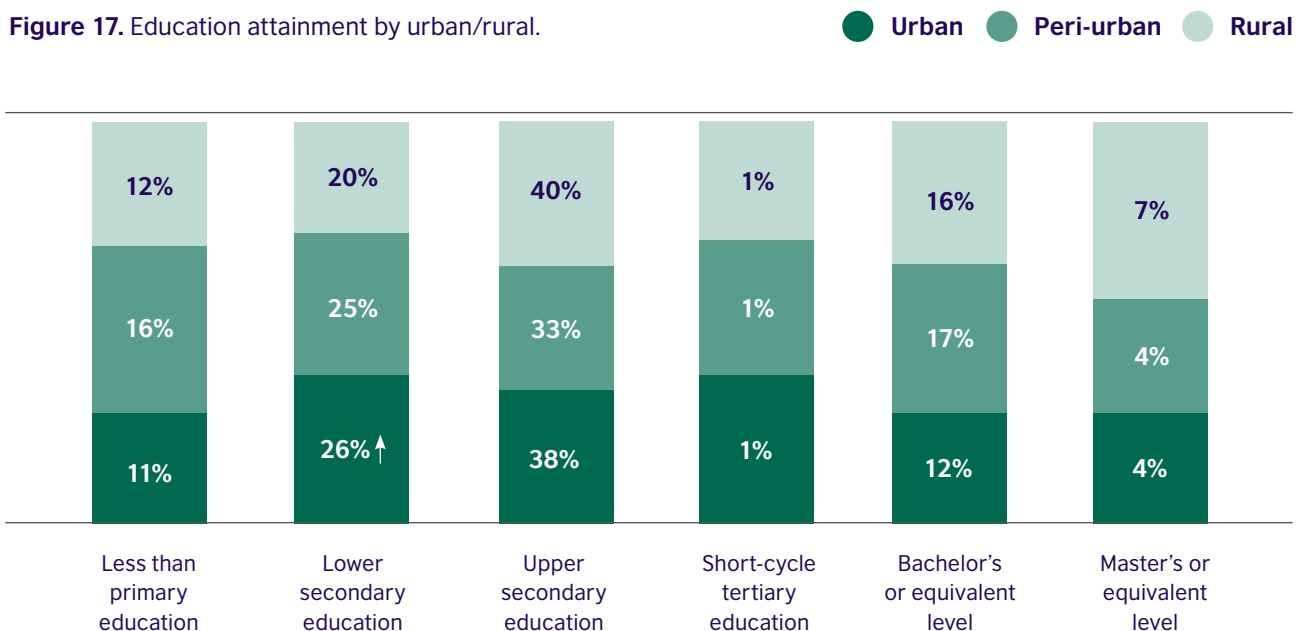
The government’s commitment to education is reflected in the budget allocation, with the education sector receiving a substantial portion of the budget. The government has set a target of increasing public spending in education to four per cent of GDP by FY2031 and five per cent of GDP by FY2041. In line with those targets, public spending is targeted to reach 3.5 per cent of GDP by FY2025. These investments are

expected to contribute to the realisation of the United Nations’ Sustainable Development Goal 4, which aims to ensure quality education for all.⁴¹

Despite these efforts, challenges persist in ensuring equitable access to education. **A notable concern is the relatively low levels of educational attainment among young people in peri-urban and rural areas, regions like Rangpur, those in lower socio-economic groups and young women.** Overall, 11 per cent of young people have less than primary education, with disparities evident across different socio-economic groups.

Peri-urban areas have the highest number of young people with below primary educational attainment. In contrast, rural areas exhibit lower rates of higher educational attainment but not the lowest attainment (below primary level), suggesting successful governmental efforts to enhance primary education access in rural regions. Indeed, young people in rural areas reported lower rates of less than primary attainment than those in urban areas, although marginal (Figure 17). However, additional support is required to enable rural youth to access higher education, particularly Bachelor’s degrees, and primary education for peri-urban young people needs attention.

Figure 17. Education attainment by urban/rural.



Base: Total sample: Weighted base, n = 3000.

³⁹ Centre for Policy Dialogue. (2023). National Budget 2023-2024: Summary Education.

⁴⁰ Centre for Policy Dialogue. (2023). National Budget 2023-2024: Summary Education.

⁴¹ Centre for Policy Dialogue. (2023). National Budget 2023-2024: Summary Education.

While there is **gender parity in those with less than primary, and women outnumbered men in lower secondary education** by 11 per cent, men generally attained higher levels of education. Disparities are evident in upper secondary and Bachelor's degree levels. However, there is promising attainment of Master's degrees for young women, although the overall attainment of Master's degrees remains relatively low (Figure 18). Domestic responsibilities hindered many rural and urban women from completing school, while young men often cited lack of financial support as the main reason for dropping out. Young women in Barisal report the lowest educational attainment across all divisions, with only four per cent having achieved a higher education degree.

Of particular concern is the **significant drop-off in educational attainment among individuals from lower social classes at the Bachelor's or equivalent level**. While a substantial proportion complete primary and secondary education, only 11 per cent from lower social classes attain a Bachelor's degree or equivalent qualification. Various factors contribute to this disparity, including the need to enter the workforce immediately after secondary education to support family income and the financial challenges associated with pursuing higher education for those from lower socio-economic backgrounds.

Figure 18. Educational attainment by gender.

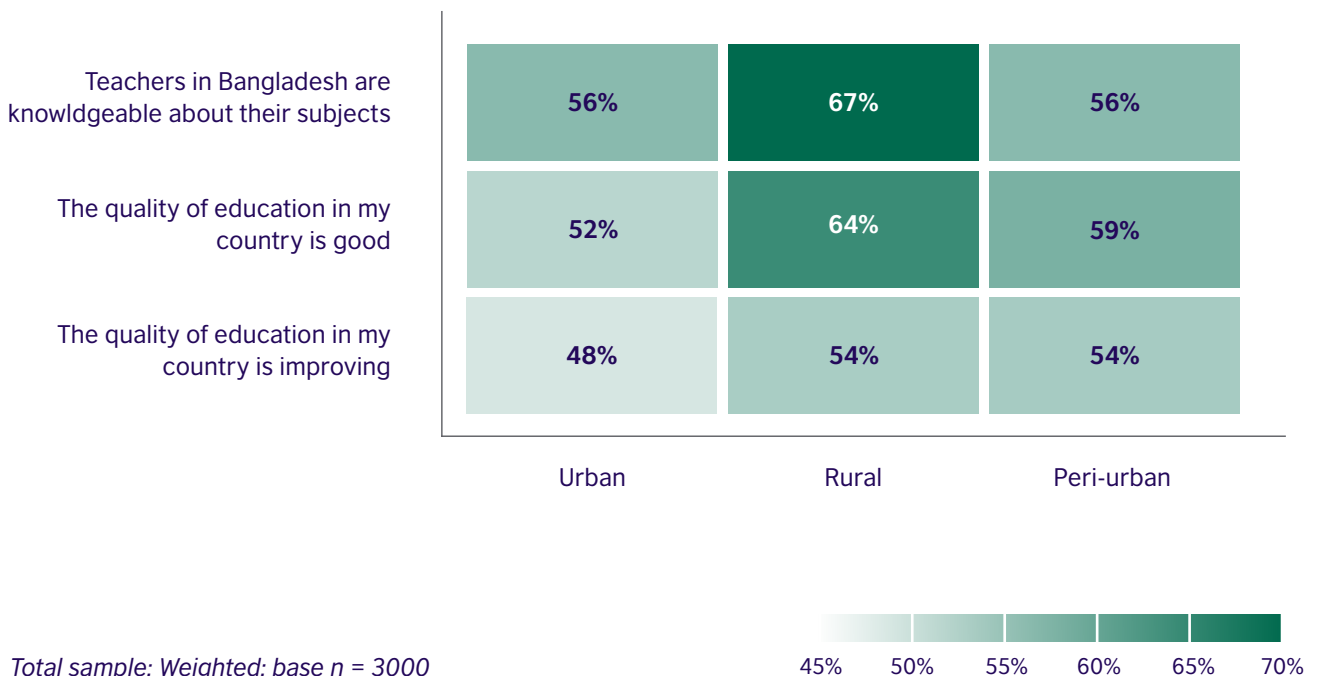


2.1.2. Perceptions of the education system are positive, but improvements in the relevance of the curriculum, teaching quality and enhancing creativity are necessary

The Government of Bangladesh is prioritising the establishment of a modern and innovation-driven education system, reflected in the substantial allocation of BDT 88,162 crore for the education sector in the upcoming FY2023-24 budget. **This investment encompasses various initiatives aimed at enhancing educational quality and accessibility, including skill-based training, infrastructure improvements, and support for underprivileged students.** Additionally, efforts are underway to provide comprehensive teacher training, digitise education, and ensure inclusion of marginalised groups.

Despite overarching positivity towards the education system,⁴² particularly among rural youth (Figure 19) and those aged 18-24, there remains a consensus on areas requiring improvement. Young people in Chattogram, Dhaka and Rangpur (Figure 20), and urban areas are particularly concerned in the quality of Bangladesh's education system (Figure 19). This can be attributed to the large number of students in urban areas and lack of teachers. Dhaka (27 per cent) and Chattogram (17 per cent) report the highest number of students in the most recent Education Statistics 2022.⁴³ In urban areas, such as Dhaka and Chittagong, the average pupil-teacher ratio can be as high as 84:1, almost twice the national average.⁴⁴

Figure 19. Percentage of young people that agree...

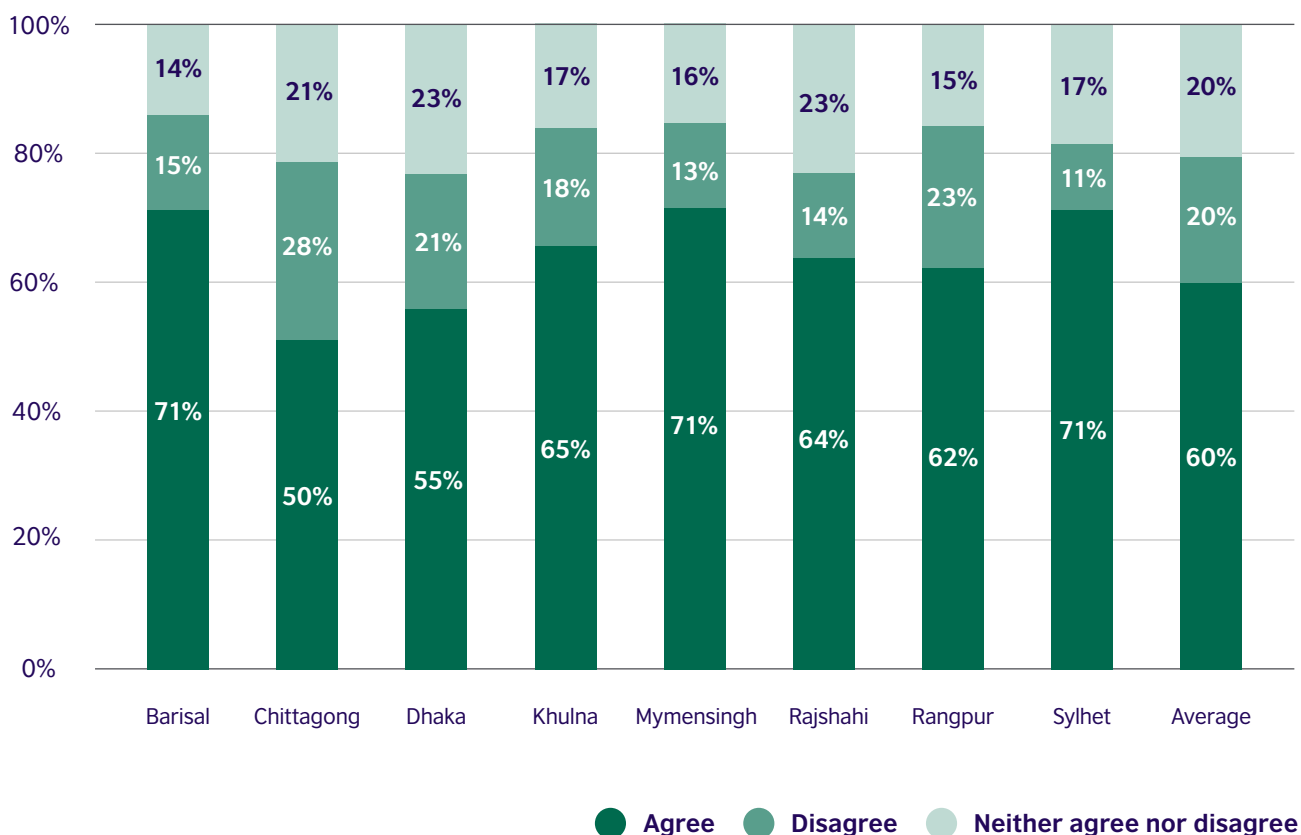


⁴² Six in 10 young people (60%) agreed that the 'quality of education is good', and over half agree that the quality is improving (53%).

⁴³ Ministry of Education. (2023). *Bangladesh Education Statistics 2022*.

⁴⁴ Asian Development Bank. (2019). *Summary Sector Assessment: Education*.

Figure 20. ‘The quality of education in my country is good’ by region.



Young people’s wider concerns revolve around teaching quality, students’ attitudes towards studies curriculum relevance, and resource constraints (Figure 21), all of which are priority areas for the Government of Bangladesh in 2023/2024. Qualitatively, the education system was noted to fail to nurture creativity and innovation, leaving many young people feeling undervalued. There are also significant systemic barriers preventing the effective translation of educational attainment into employment.⁴⁵ These issues include a **mismatch between the taught curriculum and the realities of the labour market, a lack of attention given to soft skills within education,⁴⁶ and constraints on resource within the education sector,** leading to increased reliance upon private tutelage, worsening educational inequalities.

“Education is also a business these days here, one has to study privately with a schoolteacher with money otherwise there is no chance of good results.”

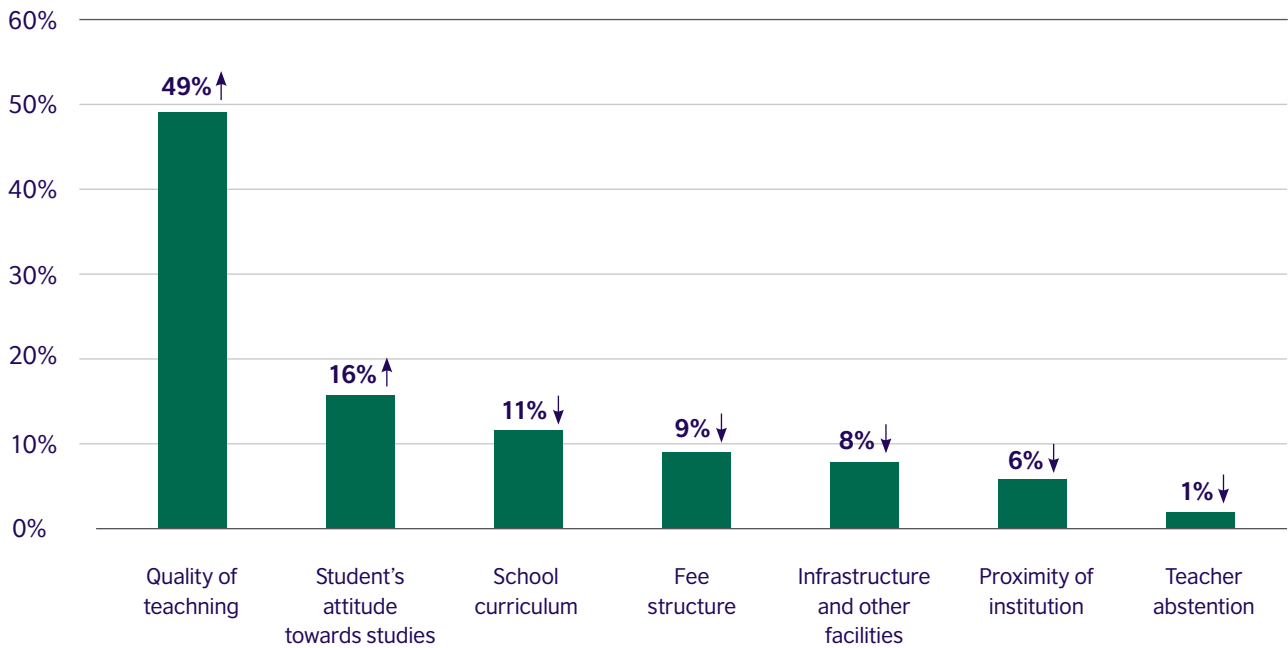
(Male Respondent, 30-35, Dhaka, entrepreneur, Bachelor’s).

There is also a gap in the learning of languages. The top three languages young people believe are important to learn are English (79 per cent), Bengali (35 per cent), and Arabic (14 per cent). This is largely linked to better employment opportunities (57 per cent), to support education goals (47 per cent) and to engage with and learn about other cultures (31 per cent). Despite desire, attainment of second languages is low. Most young people only have an elementary understanding of English (44 per cent) and just under a quarter of young people (23 per cent) have no ability to speak or understand English (Figure 22).

⁴⁵ Rahman, M., Farooq, M.O., & Selim, M. (2021). Mitigating educated youth unemployment in Bangladesh. *The Journal of Developing Areas* 55(1), <https://doi.org/10.1353/jda.2021.0014>; Centre for Policy Dialogue. (2022). Skills gap and youth employment in Bangladesh.

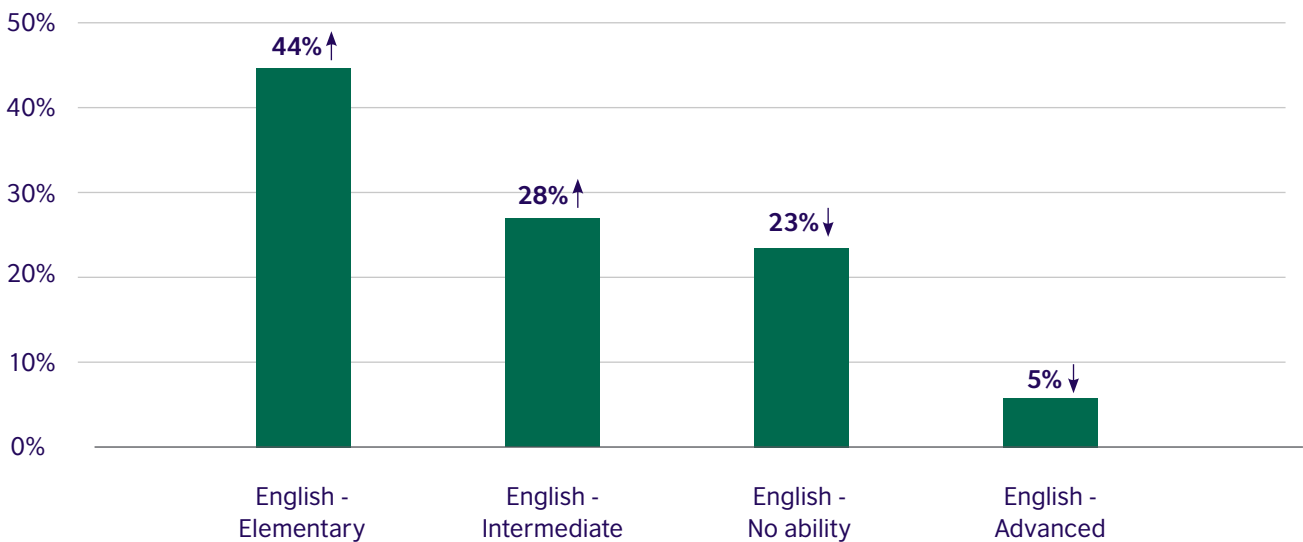
⁴⁶ Exploration of the necessary skills for employment are explored in Chapter 3.1.1.

Figure 21. Which of the following requires the greatest improvement in our education system? *



Total sample; Weighted; base n = 3000 *Arrow indicates statistical significance.

Figure 22. How well can you speak in...*



Total sample; Weighted; base n = 3000 *Arrow indicates statistical significance.

2.1.3. The education system has created a prepared workforce, but for jobs in the formal sector, challenges persist in aligning academic knowledge with market needs

Young people’s readiness for employment and life after education is critical for their transition into adulthood and the workforce. **Six out of ten (61 per cent) young people express confidence in their education’s preparation for work and two-thirds (65 per cent) do so for general life**, reflecting a sustained trend since Next Generation Bangladesh 2015.⁴⁷ However, readiness varies across educational and socio-economic backgrounds.

Higher educational attainment corresponds to greater perceived preparedness, with nearly seven in ten (69 per cent) Master’s degree holders feeling well-prepared, followed by around six in ten (61 per cent) Bachelor’s degree holders. Surprisingly, even those with lower educational attainment express moderate levels of preparedness, particularly in general life skills (general life: 52 per cent; work: 47 per cent).

Young people from lower social classes, often with lower educational attainment, surprisingly report feeling more prepared for work and general life compared to young people in the upper-social class (Figure 23). This can be attributed to Bangladesh’s largely informal job market, where available positions align with their skill sets, influencing their career aspirations. Lower-and-middle-class individuals prefer agricultural jobs (13 per cent and 16 per cent respectively), while upper-class respondents lean towards retail and trade (28 per cent).

Challenges persist in aligning academic knowledge with market needs for formal employment.

Employers in the formal sector often struggle to recruit fresh graduates lacking practical experience and whose academic knowledge does not meet market demands. Urban youth exhibit lower rates of preparedness compared to rural youth, indicating a lack of readiness for formal employment commonly sought in urban areas.

Figure 23. Preparedness for work by social class.



⁴⁷ 60% of young people in Next Generation Bangladesh 2015 also reported feeling well-prepared for employment.

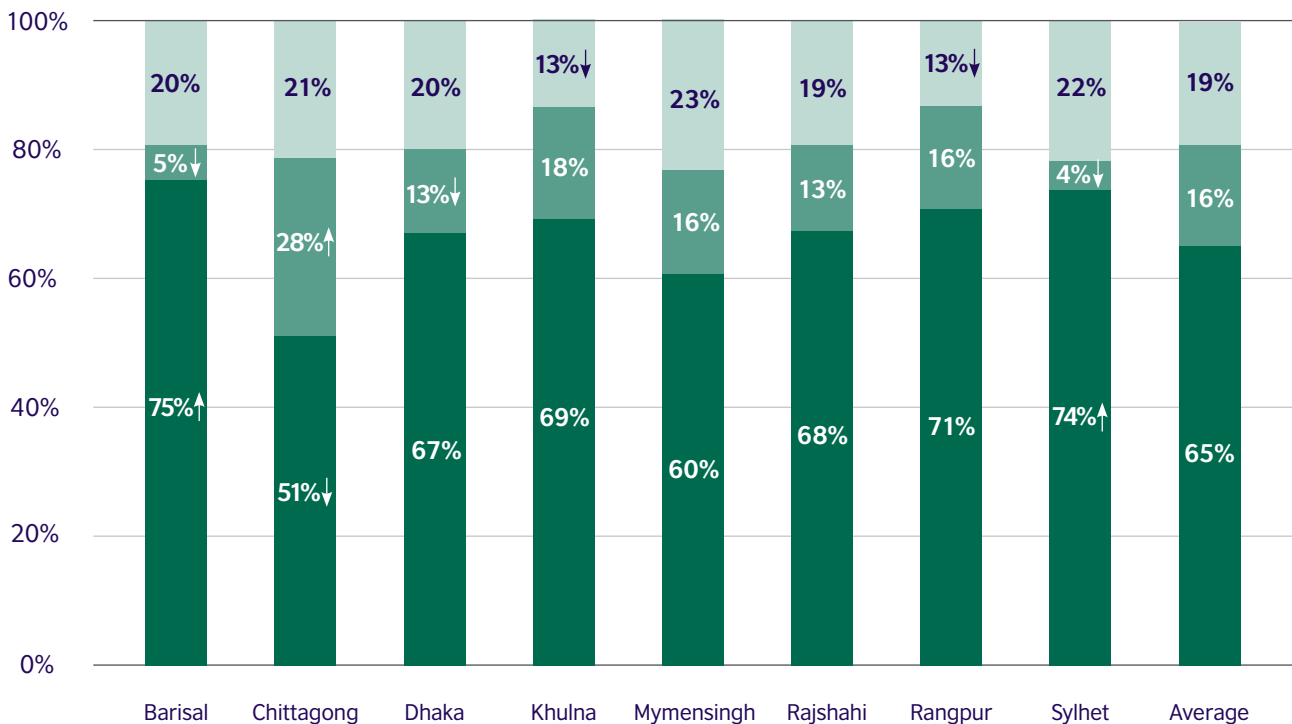
2.1.4. Increasing appetite for technical education, reflecting a career-driven Next Generation

Bangladesh’s young people are increasingly prioritising career paths, with a notable two-thirds (65 per cent) agreeing that pursuing a career outweighs completing education. This trend underscores their pragmatic approach to employment and economic realities. Additionally, there’s a growing recognition of the importance of technical education, with 65 per cent of young people emphasising its necessity over formal education, particularly young people in Barisal, Sylhet, and Rangpur (Figure 24).

The current education system is perceived as deficient in providing essential technical skills required in today’s job market. A significant concern arises from the curriculum’s focus on traditional learning methods rather than fostering digital literacy and practical skills needed for the technology-driven world and producing highly skilled and specialised young people.

“After completing formal education, one needs to seek specialised training separately. Practical knowledge should be integrated into the educational system, alongside theoretical education. Then, individuals should receive certificates for completing skill-based training from reputable institutions. Unfortunately, there seems to be a lack of emphasis on practical skill acquisition within our current educational framework.”
(Young person in deliberative sessions).

Figure 24. ‘It’s more important for me to pursue a career than to complete my education’.*



Total sample; Weighted; base n = 3000 *Arrow indicates statistical significance.

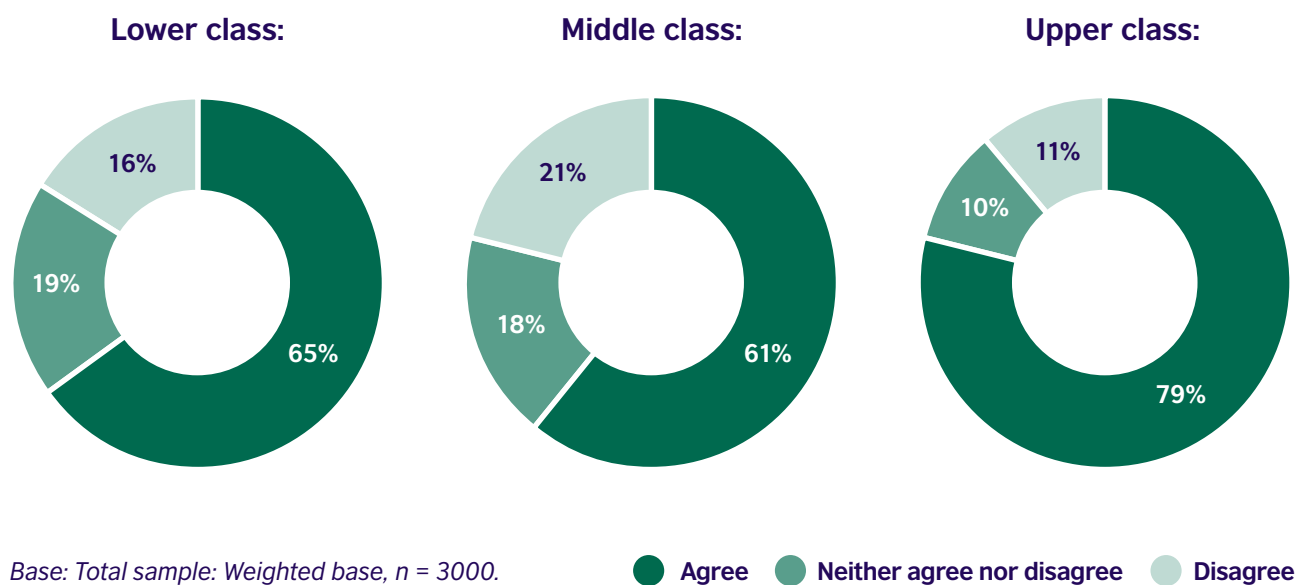
● Agree ● Disagree
● Neither agree nor disagree

However, **this shift towards technical education contrasts with the broader educational preferences revealed by the 2022 Population and Housing Census, where general education remains dominant at 89 per cent.**⁴⁸ Despite a gradual increase in the preference for technical or vocational education, the ratio remains low at less than one per cent in 2022, highlighting the need for enhanced integration and promotion of Technical, Vocational Education and Training (TVET).⁴⁹

The government’s commitment to promoting TVET initiatives, from the National Education Policy of 2010 to the government’s 2024 Election Manifesto, underscores the sustained and strategic focus on developing a skilled workforce aligned with national and global demands. The proliferation of technical and vocational institutions, with enrolments reaching 0.33 million students by 2022, signifies progress towards this goal.⁵⁰

Despite notable strides, challenges persist in the TVET sector, including low demand and deficiencies in quality and infrastructure. The absence of apprenticeships and societal biases favouring conventional education pose significant hurdles, although the Next Generation are increasingly favourable towards technical education. **There is a discernible preference for technical education among youth from the upper social class, reflecting their deeper understanding of Bangladesh’s economic landscape and the imperative for a robust technical curriculum** (Figure 25). This sentiment echoes concerns voiced in the 2015 Next Generation Bangladesh study, particularly regarding the lack of emphasis on ICT within the education system.⁵¹ These persistent challenges underscore the urgent need for reforms to align educational offerings with the evolving demands of the job market, and an increasing need for technical education.

Figure 25. How far do you agree that technical education is more the need of the hour than formal education.



Addressing these challenges requires comprehensive reforms, including enhancing teacher quality, improving infrastructure, and fostering social awareness about the value of technical education.

⁴⁸ Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics. (2023). Population and Housing Census 2022.

⁴⁹ Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics. (2023). Population and Housing Census 2022.

⁵⁰ Xpress. (2024). 'Charting the Future of Technical Education in Bangladesh', <https://pressxpress.org/2024/01/19/charting-the-future-of-technical-education-in-bangladesh/>.

⁵¹ 42% of young people in Next Generation Bangladesh 2015 agreed that ICT was not emphasised within the education system.

2.2. Employment

Headline findings:

- The structural make-up of the job market poses a significant challenge for youth employment, with employment opportunities largely concentrated at the lower levels of the pyramid, with lower paid, lower skilled informal employment.
- Barriers to youth employment, including corruption/nepotism (37 per cent) and hiring discrimination (20 per cent), are recognised. However, their prioritisation varies based on gender, locality, and social class. Responding to limited job market opportunities, young people increasingly turn to social media and digital freelancing to develop skills and seek employment.
- The systemic issue of NEET (Not in Education, Employment, or Training) youth is linked to societal pressure on young men and societal expectations leading young women into NEET status, particularly due to early marriage and household responsibilities.

2.2.1. Barriers to youth employment are gendered, but systemic concerns around corruption and nepotism are significant for NEET youth

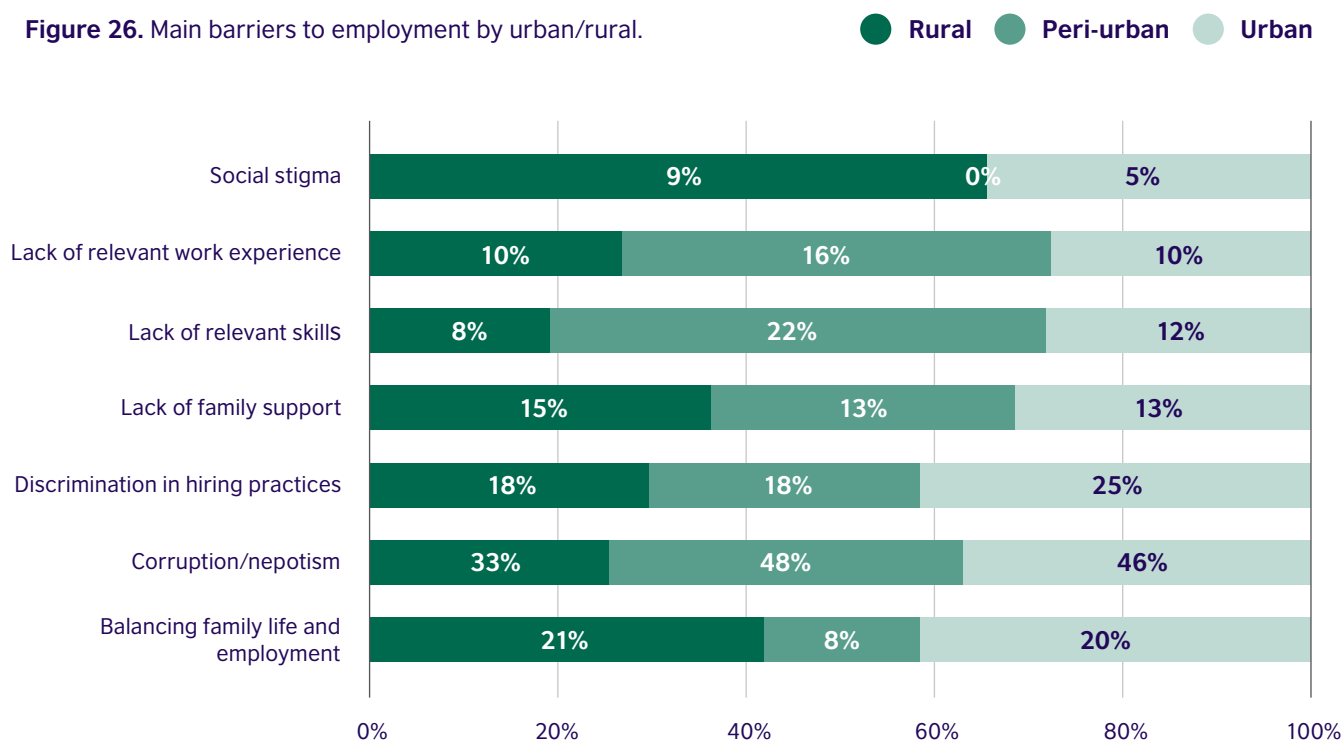
Unemployment stands out as the most pressing concern for young people in Bangladesh, with a notable 42 per cent highlighting it as the most significant challenge facing the world today. Whilst education is seen as the primary solution by almost seven in ten young people (69 per cent), the issue of NEET (Not in Education, Employment, or Training) youth is particularly concerning, with 41 per cent of the youth population falling into this category.⁵² This suggests a critical need for targeted interventions and systemic reforms to address the multifaceted challenges faced by young people transitioning into the workforce.

The key barriers to employment cited by NEET youth include corruption/nepotism (37 per cent), discrimination in hiring practices (20 per cent), and balancing family life and employment (20 per cent).

These findings echo a recent study by the Citizen’s Platform for SDGs in Bangladesh, indicating a shared concern among young people regarding corruption and nepotism as significant barriers to both employment and the country’s development.⁵³ Systemic concerns around corruption and nepotism and discrimination are particularly prevalent among urban youth (46 per cent and 20 per cent respectively), whereas rural NEET youth are more likely to report familial related barriers (Figure 26).

Perceptions of employment barriers vary across different demographics. Gender dynamics play a significant role, with societal expectations often driving young women into NEET status through early marriage and household responsibilities. The proportion of NEET women increased in 2022, indicating the challenges they face in accessing education and employment opportunities.⁵⁴ For rural NEET women, balancing family life and employment (17 per cent) poses a considerable challenge, reflecting socio-cultural norms that prevail in rural areas.

Figure 26. Main barriers to employment by urban/rural.



Base: Partial sample, Weighted, those not in education, employment or training, n=303.

⁵² Bangladesh Bureau Statistics. (2023). Labour Force Survey 2022. <https://bbs.gov.bd/site/page/111>

⁵³ The Business Standard. (2023, 14 October). 69.4% youth think nepotism, graft stifle development: Study. Retrieved from www.tbsnews.net/bangladesh/694-bangladeshi-youth-identify-corruption-primary-development-obstacle-study-718294.

⁵⁴ Bangladesh Bureau Statistics. (2023). Labour Force Survey 2022. <https://bbs.gov.bd/site/page/111>

For young mothers, the challenge lies in navigating family obligations alongside education or job opportunities, particularly in settings lacking flexible workplace policies. Re-entering education or the workforce after parenthood can be daunting, with limited access to resources and opportunities, especially in rural regions. Moreover, social stigma surrounding education and employment for young mothers further undermines their confidence and motivation.

“It can be hard for young mothers to balance work and family obligations, especially if their workplace doesn’t offer open hours or policies that help them.” (Female respondent, 30-35, Chattogram, entrepreneur).

Family support is crucial in empowering young mothers to overcome societal barriers and pursue their aspirations. However, the internalisation of traditional gender norms by young women also poses a barrier. Recent research has found that over half of young women agreed that ‘men should be prioritised over women in the case of employment’.⁵⁵

The role of societal pressure on young men to excel in their careers and be primary earners can lead to mental health issues and disillusionment, contributing to NEET status. This pressure, coupled with a disconnect between the labour market and education system, often leaves young men disillusioned with available job prospects.

“Sometimes that pressure on young men can lead to a decline of the mind to try and cope” (Male respondent, 25-29, Dhaka, entrepreneur, Bachelor’s).

To address these challenges, a shift in societal attitudes and creating a supportive environment that encourages open discussions about challenges and vulnerabilities can help alleviate the pressures faced by both young men and women, and empower them to pursue fulfilling and sustainable paths forward. Particularly for young mothers, policies promoting gender equality and work-life balance are essential.⁵⁵

As a response to the limited opportunities within the Bangladeshi job market, **young people are increasingly developing their skills and seeking employment opportunities on social media and through digital freelancing**, explored further in Chapter 3: Potential. Facebook is seen as the most effective social media channel for information on employment, education, and skills opportunities. The wide range of features offered by Facebook are attractive to young people, who engage with content such as blogging, vlogging, and features such as groups and messaging that young people utilise.

2.2.2. Low wages and long working hours dominate concerns for employed youth who are navigating a largely informal job market

Despite the overarching concern of unemployment, challenges persist for those who are employed. **Low wages stand out as the most significant issue (60 per cent), particularly for young men, with nearly seven in ten (69 per cent) citing it as their main challenge. Concerns about low wages are particularly prevalent for young people in Khulna and Rangpur, where over two-thirds (67 per cent) report this being the main concern.** Long working hours are the other concern (47 per cent). The average weekly working hours vary across industries and locations, with urban areas generally experiencing longer hours compared to rural areas.⁵⁶ Mistreatment of employees, unfavourable working environments, and workplace corruption also pose challenges, albeit to a lesser extent.

Concerns over low wages points to the structure of the job market, with a concentration of opportunities in low-paid, low-skilled informal employment. While there is a substantial number of jobs available at the bottom level, opportunities for formal, higher paid employment are scarce. Despite the services sector emerging as a significant source of employment, constituting around 38 per cent of the workforce, agriculture, forestry, and fisheries have seen a resurgence in 2022, particularly in rural areas. This resurgence is primarily attributed to a sharp increase in female employment in rural areas, reflecting evolving gender dynamics in the labour force.⁵⁷

⁵⁵ Rahemin, R. (2023). ‘How empowered are women in Bangladesh?’, *Daily Star*, OpEd

⁵⁶ International Labour Organisation. (2022). *Labour Force Survey 2022*. <https://webapps.ilo.org/surveyLib/index.php/catalog/8538>.

⁵⁷ Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics. (2023). *Labour Force Survey 2022*. <https://bbs.gov.bd/site/page/111>

The prevalence of informal employment is especially notable in rural areas among females and individuals with lower education levels, and further exacerbates the challenges faced by young people seeking sustainable employment. In regions like Rangpur, the lack of suitable job opportunities, being dominated by agricultural opportunities, is a pressing issue, reflecting the predominance of informal employment in the community.⁵⁸

“Personally, despite graduating from Rangpur, I’ve had to seek better opportunities elsewhere due to the lack of suitable jobs in my hometown. It’s crucial for government officials to decentralise industrial development away from Dhaka and spread it across different districts and divisions to reduce the unemployment rate.” (Young person in deliberative session, Rangpur).

Figure 27. Challenges in employment by gender.



⁵⁸ Please see Annex 3 for Case Study 07 on Employment opportunities in Rangpur.

Indeed, young people in Rangpur were significantly more likely than any other division to report a lack of opportunity for career growth and development (13 per cent).

However, the perceived extent of challenges is also gendered. Young women were more likely to cite long working hours, sexual harassment, corruption, and mistreatment as challenges in employment than young men (Figure 27).

Given that young women continue to earn significantly less on average than men,⁵⁹ and disproportionately make up the lower socio-economic class,⁶⁰ it is stark that they report long working hours almost to the same extent as low wages. Disparity in income is particularly glaring in rural areas, underscoring the gendered divisions in both income and social class. This interplay of factors highlights the multifaceted challenges young women face in the workforce, including issues related to both working conditions and socioeconomic status.

⁵⁹ At the national level, women earn an average monthly income of BDT 11,093 (approximately GBP 81.00), whereas their male counterparts earn BDT 14,180 (approximately GBP 104.00).

⁶⁰ A disproportionate number of young women (93%) fall into the lower social class, compared to 61% of young men. In contrast, young men are more likely to belong to the upper social class (11%), compared to only 1% of women.

2.3. International migration

Headline findings:

- More than half of young people (55 per cent) are open to the idea of international migration as a potential solution to their economic concerns. Notably, a higher proportion of young men (64 per cent) are willing to relocate compared to women (46 per cent).
- Saudi Arabia is identified as the most appealing destination for individuals with lower educational attainment, while Canada is increasingly preferred by those with upper secondary education and above. The religious appeal of Saudi Arabia can however open up young people and migrants to vulnerability and exploitation.
- Interestingly, our research highlights a changing perspective among Bangladeshi postgraduate students, who are showing growing interest in countries like Saudi Arabia for employment and opportunities. Despite being a minority, 21 per cent of master's degree holders see Saudi Arabia as an attractive destination influenced namely by a common religion, but also by factors such as established support networks, economic prospects, and cultural appeal.
- Many young people in Bangladesh embrace migration as a chance to represent their country abroad and eventually contribute to its development upon returning home. This positive view is underpinned by the significant role of remittance in the country's economy. In 2023 alone, migrants sent back \$21.9 billion through official channels, providing vital financial support to their families, and contributing to Bangladesh's overall development.
- Sylhet stands out with the highest rating for the United Kingdom for migration, continuing a historical trend since 1930. Up to 95 per cent of UK Bangladeshi residents trace their roots back to the Greater Sylhet Region.

2.3.1. To young people in Bangladesh, one potential solution to the perceived lack of economic opportunity is international migration

People from Bangladesh constitute the sixth largest migrant community in the world and migration has consistently remained a key source of foreign exchange and job creation, roughly employing around 11 per cent of the Bangladeshi workforce.⁶¹ It has also been regarded as a viable option for many, especially young people, to change life trajectories.⁶² In line with this, **over half of young people (55 per cent) in Bangladesh in the Next Generation survey are willing to move.**

Young men are the most likely group to be willing to relocate, with 64 per cent of men willing to move compared to 46 per cent of women. However, within the female category, women aged 18-24 are more willing (54 per cent) to move, demonstrating a shift in attitudes generationally.

Young people in Sylhet reported the highest willingness to migrate across all divisions. This is driven primarily by search for employment and economic opportunities, and the influence of social media in promoting idyllic pictures of foreign lifestyles, even if that may not be the case. This is explored further in Annex 3 in Case Study 04 into international migration from Sylhet.

⁶¹ Cauliffe, M and A. Triandafyllidou (eds.), (2021). *World migration report 2022*. International Organisation for Migration, Geneva.

⁶² Jahan, Nusrat. (2020). 'High cost of migration and the woes of our workers', *Daily Star, OpEd*.

“Most individuals in Sylhet aspire to migrate abroad. The allure of a foreign lifestyle, portrayed through social media videos or anecdotes from others, heavily influences their decisions.” (Triad interview, young people who wish and do not wish to migrate, Sylhet).

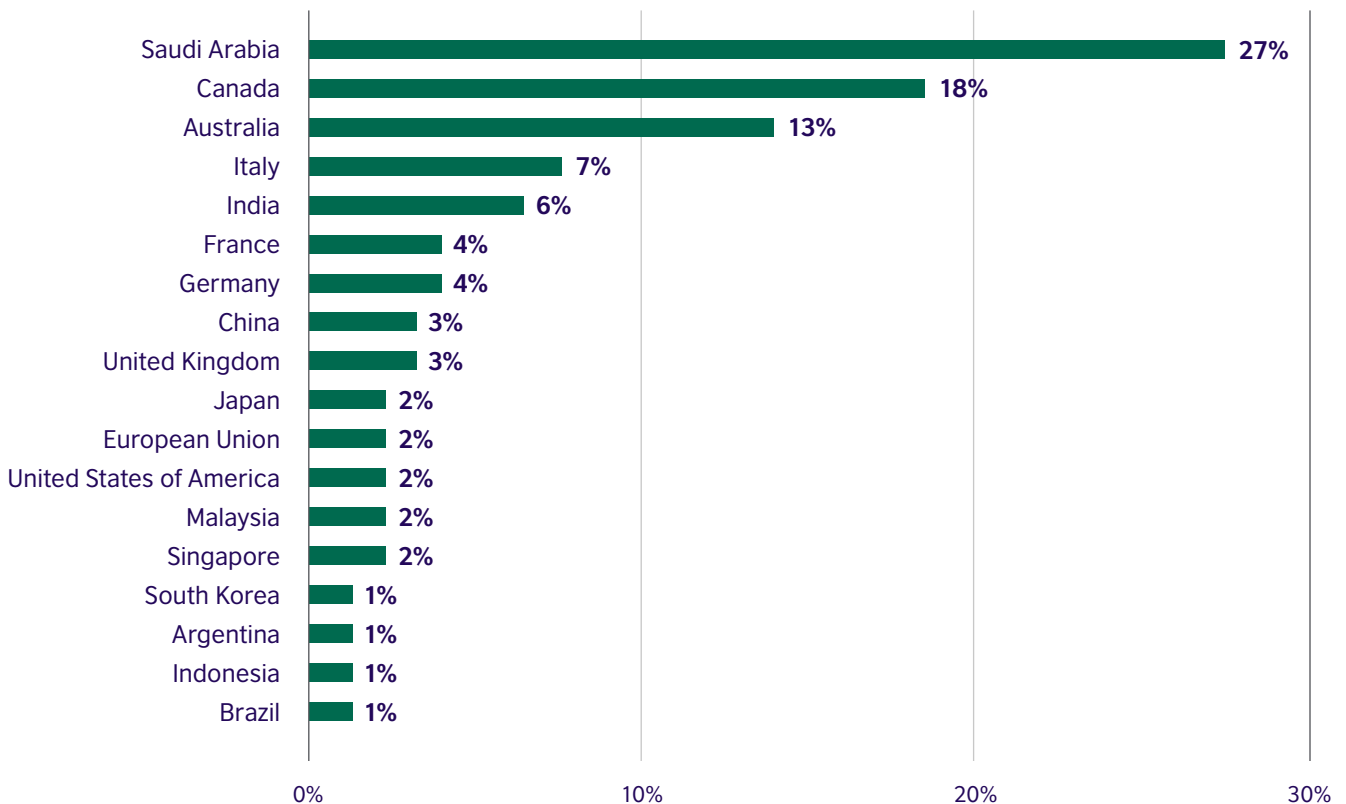
2.3.2. Saudi Arabia, Canada and Australia are the overall top three destinations for young people, with ranked preferences varying by educational attainment, division, gender, and urbanity

The most attractive countries for young Bangladeshi's are Saudi Arabia (27 per cent), Canada (18 per cent) and Australia (13 per cent) (Figure 28). The primary reasons these countries are seen as attractive are education opportunities (26 per cent), language, history, and culture (25 per cent), employment opportunities (23 per cent), and common religion (16 per cent).

“Young people are going abroad for a modern system and cultural structure, higher education, employment opportunities.” (Male Respondent, 30-35, Chattogram, employed full time, Master's).

“If there were more job opportunities available in our country, fewer individuals would feel compelled to seek employment abroad. To retain talent, job sectors need to expand, and salaries must be competitive.” (Deliberative session member, Khulna).

Figure 28. Which of the following countries do you think are most attractive to you personally?



Base: Total sample: Weighted base, n = 3000.

These are the top three attractive countries for young people across educational attainment, gender, age, division, disability, urbanity, internet usage and NEET status. However, the prioritisation of the three countries varies. Saudi Arabia is by far the most attractive country for those with lower educational attainment, with Canada increasingly the most attractive for upper secondary attainment and above (Figure 29).

In line with this, young people in Rangpur are significantly more likely to report Saudi Arabia as their top choice (Figure 30). As the division with the lowest reported educational attainment and highest concerns around employment opportunities, this correlates with the wider trend of those with lower educational attainment favouring the country for economic opportunity.

Figure 29. Top three most attractive countries by educational attainment.

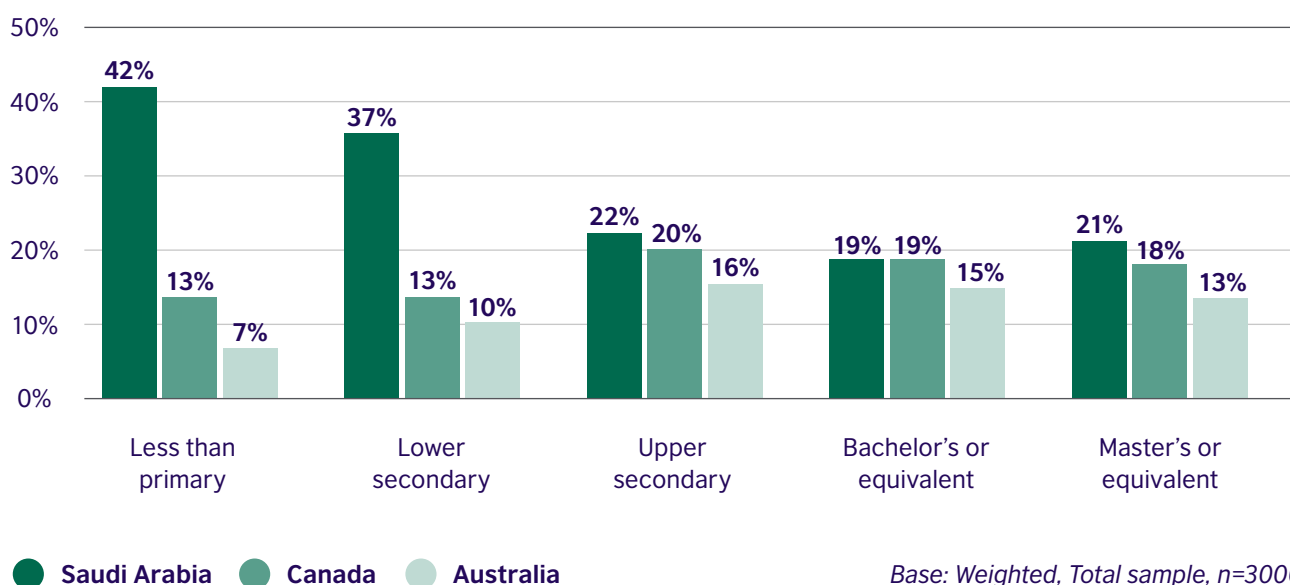
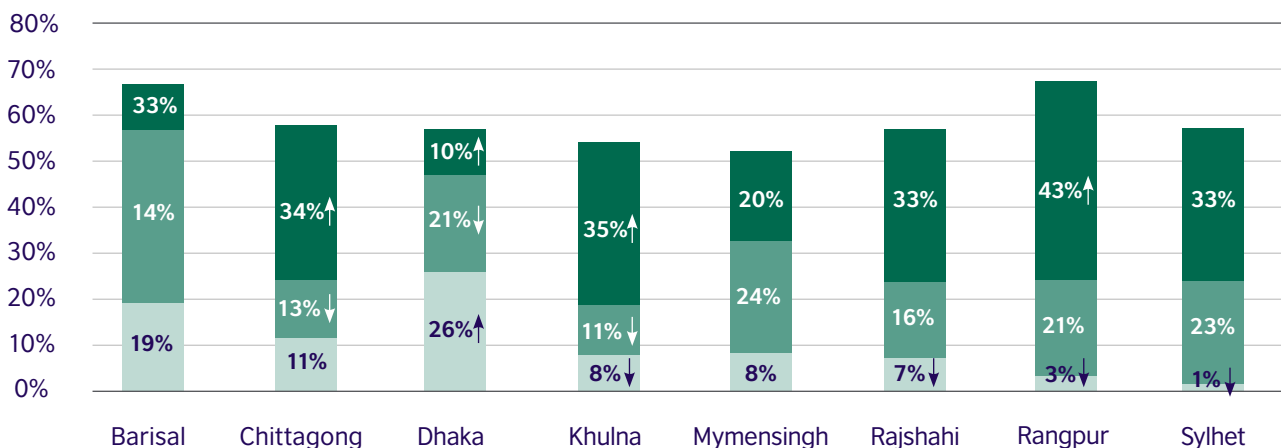
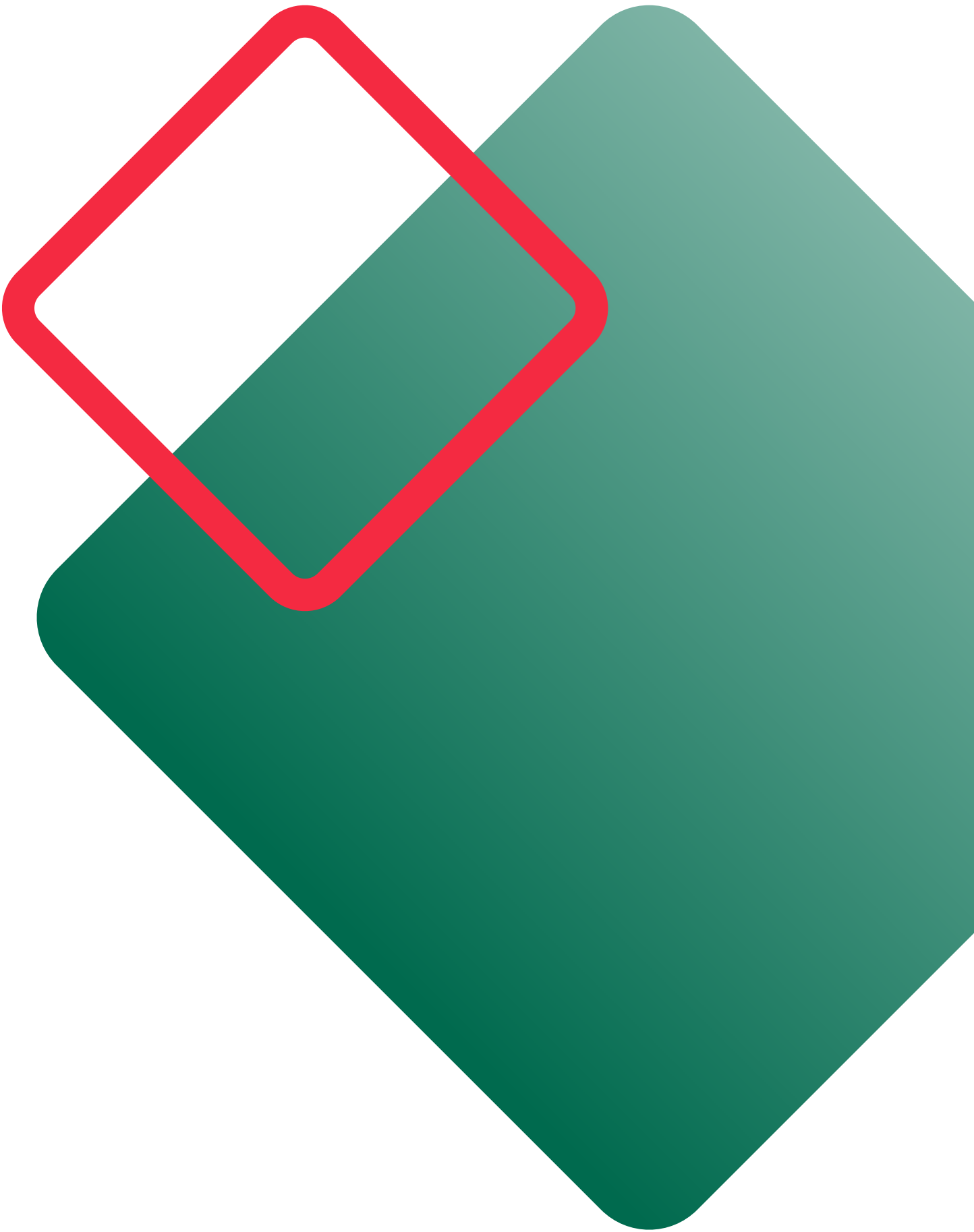


Figure 30. Top three attractive countries by division.*

● Australia ● Canada ● Saudi Arabia



Base: Weighted. Total sample, n=3000. *Arrow indicates statistical significance.

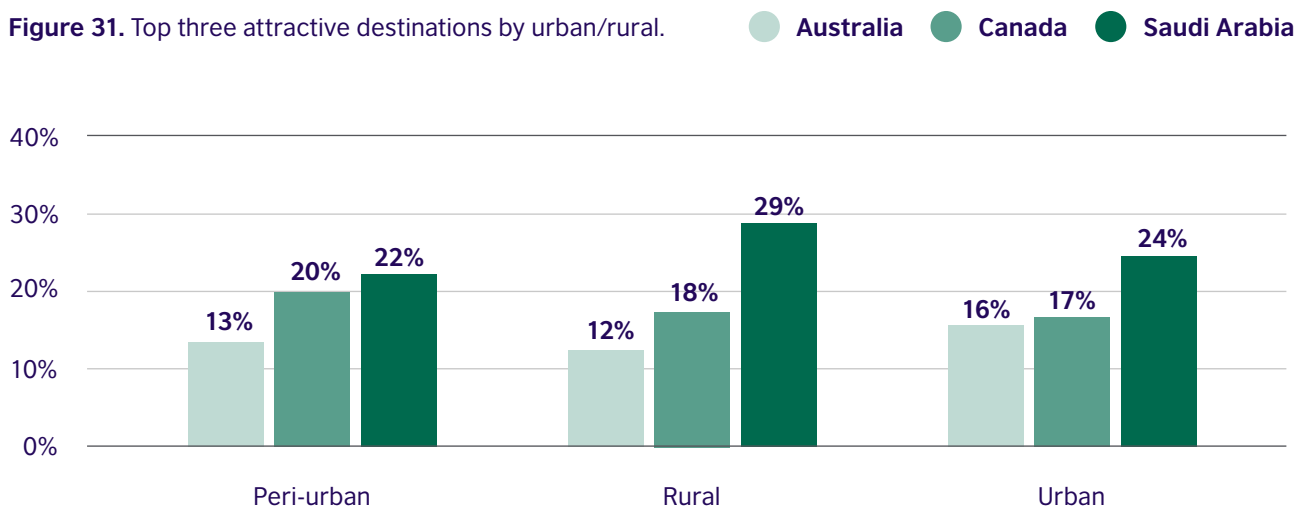


In Bangladesh, the phenomenon of labour migration to oil-rich Gulf countries, predominantly Saudi Arabia, has long been a prominent feature of the socio-economic landscape. Every year, millions of predominantly low-skilled workers from South Asian countries, including Bangladesh, have sought temporary employment visas and short-term contracts in these destinations, driven by the promise of economic opportunities.⁶³ **The preference for Saudi Arabia is strongest amongst rural youth and young women** (Figure 31 and Figure 32). Whilst most emigrants from Bangladesh are men,

more women have been leaving, particularly to go to the Middle East and East Asia.⁶⁴

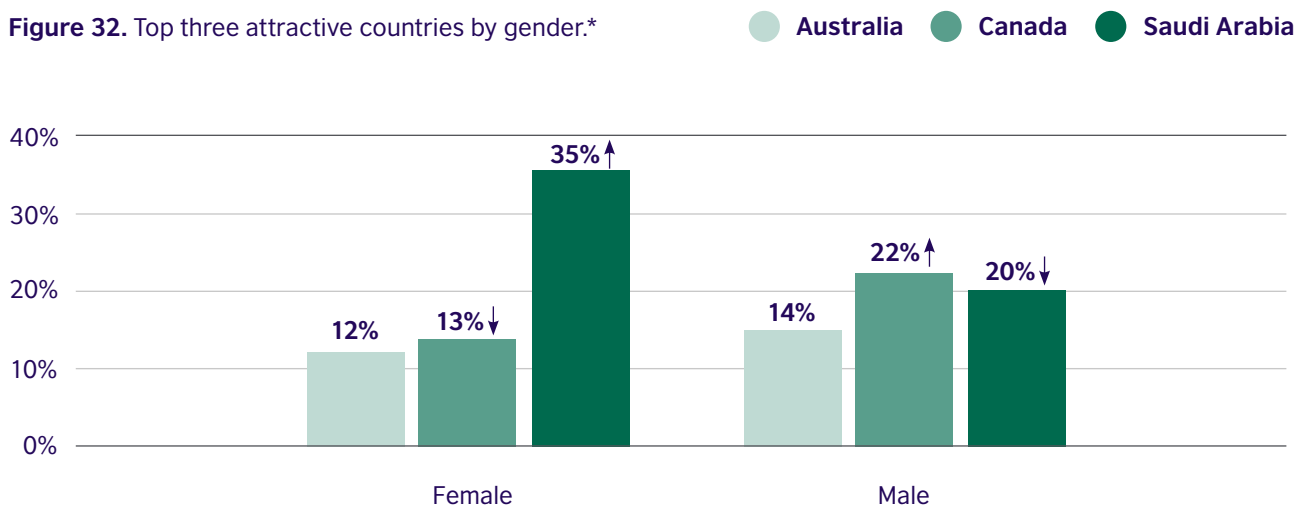
Whilst one-third of young people reported Saudi Arabia as attractive for employment opportunities (33 per cent), the existence of a common religion was the key reason driving Saudi Arabia's attractiveness (58 per cent). Indeed, this is the key reason driving the two in ten (21 per cent) young people with a Master's degree highlighting Saudi Arabia as the most attractive country. Just over six in ten (61 per cent)

Figure 31. Top three attractive destinations by urban/rural.



Base: Weighted. Total sample, n=3000. *Arrow indicates statistical significance.

Figure 32. Top three attractive countries by gender.*



Base: Weighted. Total sample, n=3000. *Arrow indicates statistical significance.

⁶³ Bossavie, L. (2023). *Low-skilled temporary migration policies: The case of Bangladesh*.

⁶⁴ Farhana, K. M., Mannon, K. A., (2024). 'Bangladesh's economic vitality owes in part to migration and remittances', ReliefWeb. <https://reliefweb.int/report/bangladesh/bangladeshs-economic-vitality-owes-part-migration-and-remittances>.

young people with this higher educational attainment reported 'common religion' as the driver.

The dream of working in Saudi is deeply rooted in religious faith, which can bring vulnerabilities and risks for young people.⁶⁵ Many migrants are willing to pay steep fees to fulfil this aspiration, with an expensive recruitment process and 'visa trading' that remain rampant and normalised.

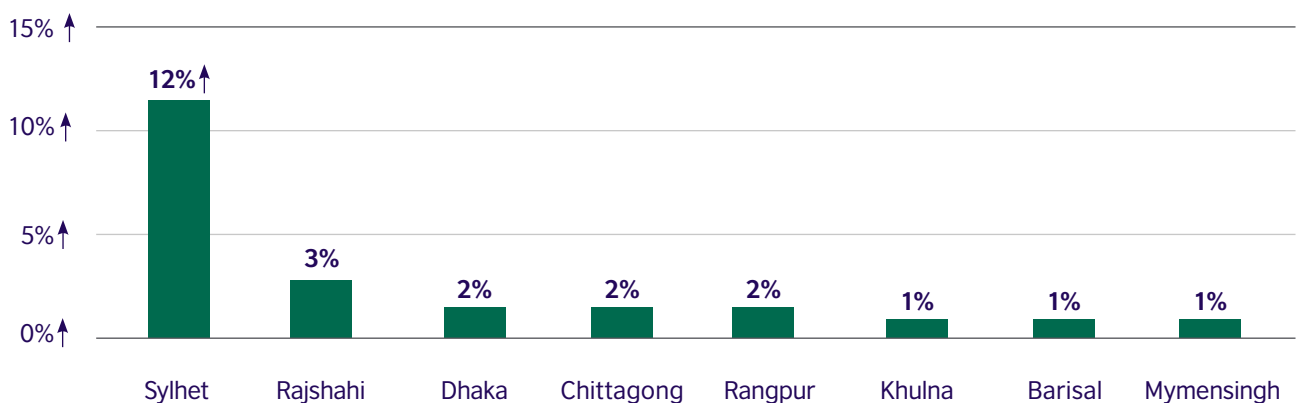
“My cousin planned to go abroad to Saudi Arabia. Everything was set. We gave the broker 500,000 taka. He took the money, assured my cousin and his family that he would send him abroad, then he boarded the plane. But instead, he landed him in Delhi. It turned out the visa was fake. The broker was fraudulent. There was no legitimate visa. Consequently, he had to return to Bangladesh.” (Female respondent, 25-29, Sylhet, not interested in migrating).

Additionally, once in Saudi Arabia, migrants are often hesitant to file complaints against employers due to fears of deportation and being banned from re-entry,

which would prevent them from fulfilling their religious obligations.⁶⁶ Young women in particular do not always secure a stable income or safe residence; many have been victims of torture and violence, including sexual exploitation, and have returned to Bangladesh.⁶⁷ **Whilst Saudi Arabia offers many opportunities, there are concerns surrounding the exploitation of migrants, particularly young women, and the prevalence of fraudulent recruitment practices.**

Whilst the United Kingdom ranks low as the top-rated attractive country (three per cent), young people in Sylhet are significantly more likely than any other division to report the United Kingdom as their top choice to migrate to (Figure 33). This continues the trend of Sylheti migration to the UK since 1930. Up to 95 per cent of Bangladeshi people living in the United Kingdom either originate or come from the Greater Sylhet Region.⁶⁸ The key reasons that the UK is attractive to young people in Sylhet is for employment (58 per cent) and education opportunities (46 per cent), and quality of life (53 per cent). However, language, history, and culture (31 per cent) also play a role, which given the historic relationship and cultural building between the Sylheti community and the UK, is unsurprising.

Figure 33. United Kingdom as the first choice of country by division.*



Base: Weighted. Total sample, n=3000. *Arrow indicates statistical significance.

⁶⁵ Saraswathi, V. (2024). 'Faith and free visas secure the Saudi stranglehold over Bangladeshi migrants'. Migrant-rights.org. www.migrant-rights.org/2024/02/faith-and-free-visas-secure-the-saudi-stranglehold-over-bangladeshi-migrants/

⁶⁶ Saraswathi, V. (2024). 'Faith and free visas secure the Saudi stranglehold over Bangladeshi migrants'. Migrant-rights.org. www.migrant-rights.org/2024/02/faith-and-free-visas-secure-the-saudi-stranglehold-over-bangladeshi-migrants/

⁶⁷ Farhana, K. M., Mannon, K. A., (2024). 'Bangladesh's economic vitality owes in part to migration and remittances', ReliefWeb. <https://reliefweb.int/report/bangladesh/bangladeshs-economic-vitality-owes-part-migration-and-remittances>.

⁶⁸ Aktar, F., Ahmad, A., and Haque, S. (2023). *International migration and social unrest: a study on the 'Londoni' villages of Sylhet and Sunamganj districts of Bangladesh*

2.3.3. Most young people view migration positively, seeing it as an opportunity to become representatives of Bangladesh and return to contribute to the country's betterment

Many young people in Bangladesh view migration positively, considering it an opportunity to represent their country abroad and eventually contribute to its development upon their return. One significant aspect of this perspective is the role of remittance. Remittance plays a crucial role in the country's economy, with those working abroad often sending money back to support their families. In 2023, migrants sent back \$21.9 billion via official remittance channels, which is a major source of development for Bangladesh.⁶⁹ Aside from India, Saudi Arabia has long ranked as the largest origin of official remittances to Bangladesh, accounting for \$4.1 billion in 2022, followed by other Gulf countries. This financial support aids in various sectors and mitigates economic challenges, such as inflation caused by fluctuations in the dollar rate.

“I don't necessarily see leaving the country as a bad thing. Bangladesh earns from three main sectors: agriculture, labour, and remittance. Remittance, in particular, plays a crucial role. Those with families here send money back. Look at the fluctuation in the dollar rate; it's causing inflation. Many people in my organisation have migrated abroad. The individuals I initially worked with have left, but they continue to support us financially from overseas. They're standing by us, albeit invisibly, aiding our fieldwork.” (Male respondent, 18-24, community influencer, Sylhet).

Furthermore, **successful individuals who migrate abroad and achieve recognition are seen to become representatives of Bangladesh, enhancing the country's image globally.** Moreover, many young people who emigrated choose to return to Bangladesh after gaining experience and education abroad, eager to contribute to the nation's progress. Professionals like doctors, lawyers, and IT experts who receive education overseas often return to practice their professions, bringing valuable skills and knowledge back for the betterment of Bangladesh.

“If they work in a foreign country and achieve success, it reflects positively on our nation. For instance, if a Bangladeshi student studies in Canada and then secures a job at Google or Amazon, they become a representative of Bangladesh, garnering respect for our country. Not all students choose to settle abroad permanently; most return to contribute to the betterment of Bangladesh.”

(Deliberative session member, Dhaka).

⁶⁹ Farhana, K. M., Mannon, K. A., (2024). 'Bangladesh's economic vitality owes in part to migration and remittances', ReliefWeb. <https://reliefweb.int/report/bangladesh/bangladeshs-economic-vitality-owes-part-migration-and-remittances>.

2.4 Youth voice in the community

Headline findings:

- Young people demonstrate a strong sense of belonging to their communities, with over half (57 per cent) feeling connected in some way. However, there is a noticeable absence of community leadership, as no respondents identified community leaders as influential figures or trustworthy information sources.
- Social media plays a significant role in shaping perceptions of community leaders. Some young people rely on social media activity to gauge a leader's involvement, while others believe it may create a false perception not aligned with reality.

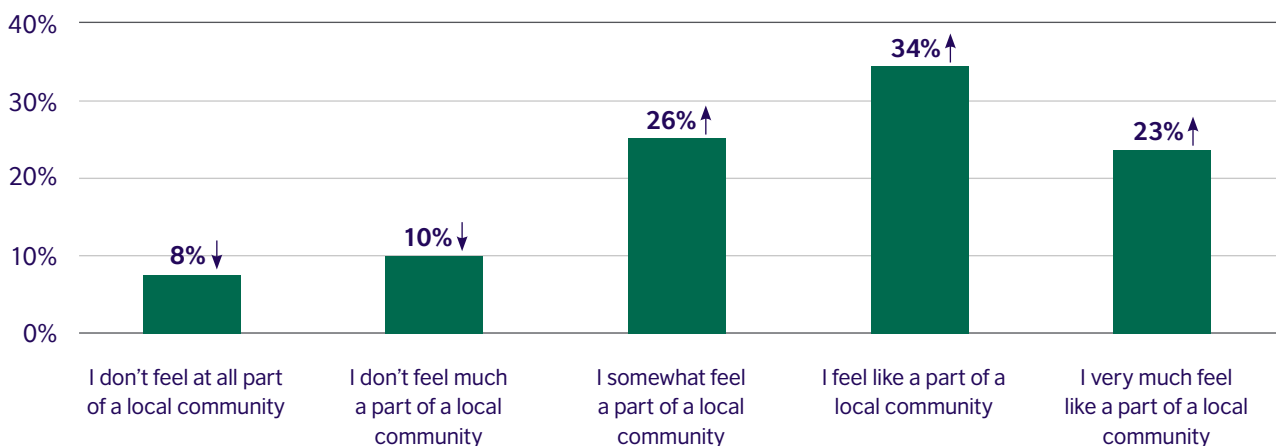
2.4.1. Young people feel a strong sense of community belonging, but there is a dearth in local community leadership

There is a strong sense of belonging amongst youth.

Over half (57 per cent) of young people feel a part of a community in some way and only eight per cent do not feel at all a part of a local community, suggesting strong community ties (see Figure 34). **The strongest community belonging was reported amongst youth aged 25-30, 60 per cent of whom described strong community ties.** The lowest level of belonging is seen amongst the older cohort, aged 31-35, where just over half (52 per cent) feel a sense of belonging. Despite this, one in five (21 per cent) 30–35-year-olds are involved in decision making processes in their community.

Interestingly, internet users are slightly more likely to report a sense of belonging than non-internet users – 59 per cent vs 54 per cent with no significant variations in belonging by gender, urbanity, disability or NEET classification. This may suggest an emerging role of the internet in facilitating community ties and helping individuals to feel a sense of belonging. Indeed, **social media plays a significant role in shaping perceptions of community leaders, with some young people relying on social media activity to gauge a leader's involvement**, while others believe it may create a false perception not aligned with reality. However, there is acknowledgment of community leaders' increasing activity and awareness on social media platforms.

Figure 34. Do you feel that you are part of a local community?*



Base: Total sample; Weighted; base n = 3000 *Arrow indicates statistical significance

“We can’t see a person’s inner agenda, so we rely on their social media activities to form a perception of them. If we see a community leader active on social media, we may assume they are actively working.” (Female respondent, 25-29, Dhaka, Bachelor’s, employed full time).

“I believe community leaders portray themselves as something else on social media, but in reality, they are entirely different. There is hardly any similarity. So, social media might create a false perception of the community leader that does not align with reality.” (Female respondent, 18-24, Sylhet, student).

Despite feeling a strong sense of belonging to local communities, there appears to be a dearth in trust in community leadership. No respondents indicated community leaders to be the most influential figures in their lives, and they were not considered to be trustworthy information sharers either. Young people are particularly distrustful of local community leaders involved in politics. Many young people reported instances of inaction, motivated by political concerns such as fear of losing votes, that has eroded trust in community leaders. For young people, it shows a disconnect between the leader’s responsibilities to the community and their political aspirations.

“There’s a mosque near our house where there was a land conflict. People went to the community leader for a solution, and he assured both parties he would resolve the issue but did nothing, fearing a loss of votes. A community leader should prioritise the community over votes or followers.” (Female respondent, 24-29, Dhaka, Bachelors, Unemployed but not looking for a job).

Family, remain the most influential factor in young people’s lives (67 per cent), followed by peers/friends (21 per cent). Qualitative insights also indicate that youth often lament the lack of dialogue from community leaders, with young people suggesting more face-to-face meetings with community leaders to address local problems, allow for more meaningful exchanges and increase the likelihood of youth opinions being considered and acted upon by community leaders.

“Community leaders should still arrange meetings with youths in their community at least once a week. There they can ask the youth about their problems, and what they expect from the community leaders.” (Female respondent, 18-24, Dhaka, student).

2.5. Youth voice in political engagement

Headline findings:

- Despite widespread distrust (58 per cent) and disengagement (65 per cent very unengaged) towards politics, young people exhibit a strong desire for change and political involvement. While they may feel disconnected from politics, they are not apathetic and are invested in the development of Bangladesh.
- Key factors influencing engagement with politics include gender, employment status, educational attainment, and region.
- Over half (57 per cent) of young people actively engage in various political activities, primarily at the grassroots level within their communities and informal avenues. This includes discussing politics with friends or family (24 per cent of young people), sharing an opinion about politics on social media (ten per cent) and taking part in a protest or demonstration (six per cent).
- To effectively engage, young people need an enabling environment that values their contributions and views young people as assets to engage in politics.

2.5.1. Young people’s disengagement with politics is driven by distrust and a lack of representation, but young people are not apathetic

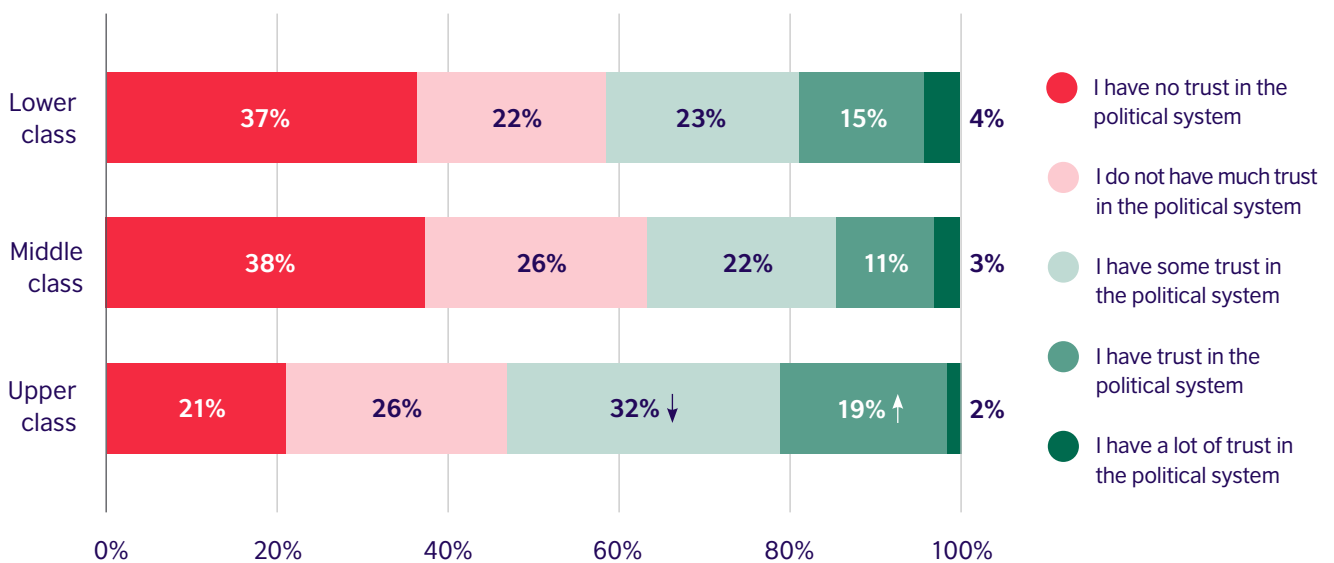
There are high levels of disengagement with politics amongst young people, driven by distrust and a lack of youth representation. Over half of young people (58 per cent) indicated they have little to no trust in the political system, particularly political parties, deemed untrustworthy by 36 per cent of young people. This scepticism is more pronounced among the lower social class, indicating a sense of disenfranchisement and disillusionment with the political establishment (Figure 35). **Approximately three quarters of young people attribute their distrust in the political system to perceptions of corruption.** Many view politics and politicians as primarily driven by personal gain, rather than a commitment to public service. They see politics as a means to accumulate wealth, often disregarding legality, and navigate a system perceived as corrupted.

“What does politics mean to the youth? It is the easiest way to deal with a corrupted system. It is one of the best ways to be famous. These should not be the reasons for joining politics.” (Female respondent, 25-29, Chattogram, employed full time, Master’s).

Additionally, fear of reprisal is identified by six per cent of respondents as a factor contributing to distrust. Many young people express concerns about potential repercussions, such as adverse impacts on employment and social standing, should they engage in politics. Familial discouragement also plays a role, as families often prioritise safeguarding their children’s future, discouraging political involvement until certain educational qualifications are attained.

“I am not involved in political work because my family prevents me. The biggest hurdle for young people is their career. And I think it is better not to have political involvement before attaining certain educational qualifications.” (Female respondent, 25-29, Rangpur, entrepreneur, Bachelor’s).

Figure 35. What level of trust do you have in the political system?



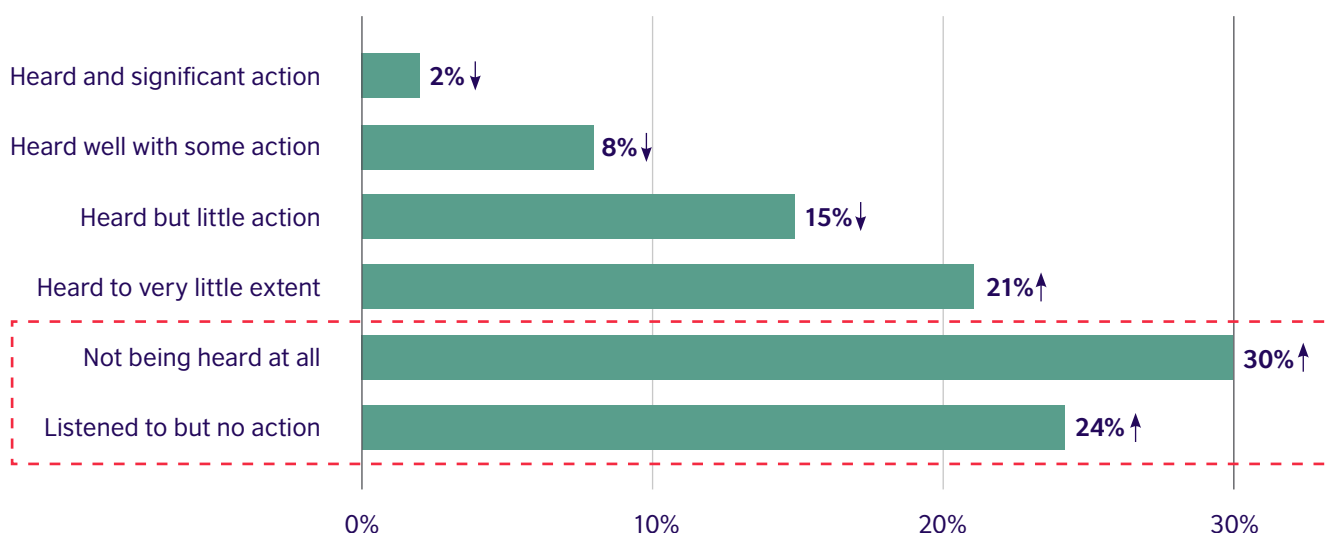
Base: Total sample; Weighted; base n = 3000

Linked to this distrust is a notable absence of representation in political leadership and decision-making processes of young people. One-third believe their voices go entirely ignored (Figure 36), and just under a quarter believe they are listened to, but with no action (24 per cent).

“Young people make up a majority of the population of Bangladesh, yet they are woefully underrepresented in our government and in our decision-making processes. This is a serious problem as it means that the voices and concerns of young people are not being heard.” (Female respondent, 18-24, Sylhet, employed full time, upper secondary).

This lack of representation is attributed to systemic biases favouring established politicians, coupled with a lack of resources and experience among young people for meaningful political engagement. Addressing these barriers is crucial to fostering greater youth involvement in politics and ensuring their voices are heard in shaping the country’s future.

Figure 36. Do you think the voices of young people on national issues are being heard in your country?*



Base: Total sample; Weighted; base n = 3000 *Arrow indicates statistical significance.

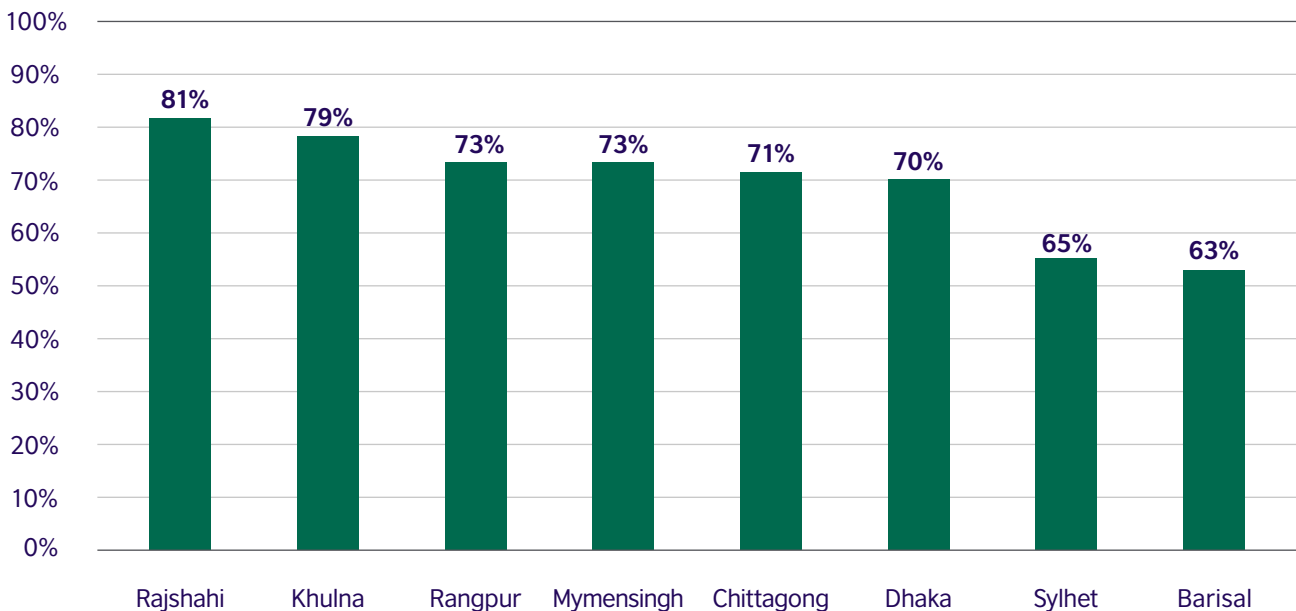
As a result of these factors, two-thirds of young people reported feeling ‘very unengaged’ with politics (65 per cent). **This engagement with politics intersects with gender, employment status, educational attainment, and region:**

- **Young women are significantly less engaged than young men** (Very unengaged: female: 79 per cent; male: 51 per cent), suggesting a lack of representation and effort to engage young women in the political system. Over half of young women had not engaged with any political activity in the last 12 months (52 per cent) compared to just under a third of young men (31 per cent).
- Surprisingly, **unemployed youth report higher levels of engagement with four per cent reporting being very engaged, and only 59 per cent ‘very unengaged’**. Indeed, over two-thirds of unemployed youth engaged in some kind of political activity in the last 12 months (66 per cent). Despite higher levels of engagement with politics in general, unemployed youth are more likely to report not feeling heard at all (34 per cent), potentially

suggesting that whilst unemployed youth are making efforts to engage in politics, they do not feel it is being acted on or recognised. This points to the wider stigmatisation of unemployed individuals, with their status being blamed upon the individual, rather than societal or economic factors. Translating these concerns into political dialogue or action may face similar challenges.

- **In general, higher educational attainment is associated with higher levels of political engagement.** For example, 73 per cent of those with less than primary education report being very disengaged, compared to 63 per cent of those with a Master’s or equivalent.
- Young people in Barisal report the highest engagement with politics divisionally (29 per cent), followed by Sylhet (26 per cent) and Rangpur (22 per cent). Rajshahi and Khulna reported the lowest levels of disengagement, with around eight in ten in both divisions reportedly unengaged with politics (Figure 37).

Figure 37. Percentage of young people who reported being unengaged with politics by division.



Base: Weighted. Total sample, n=3000.

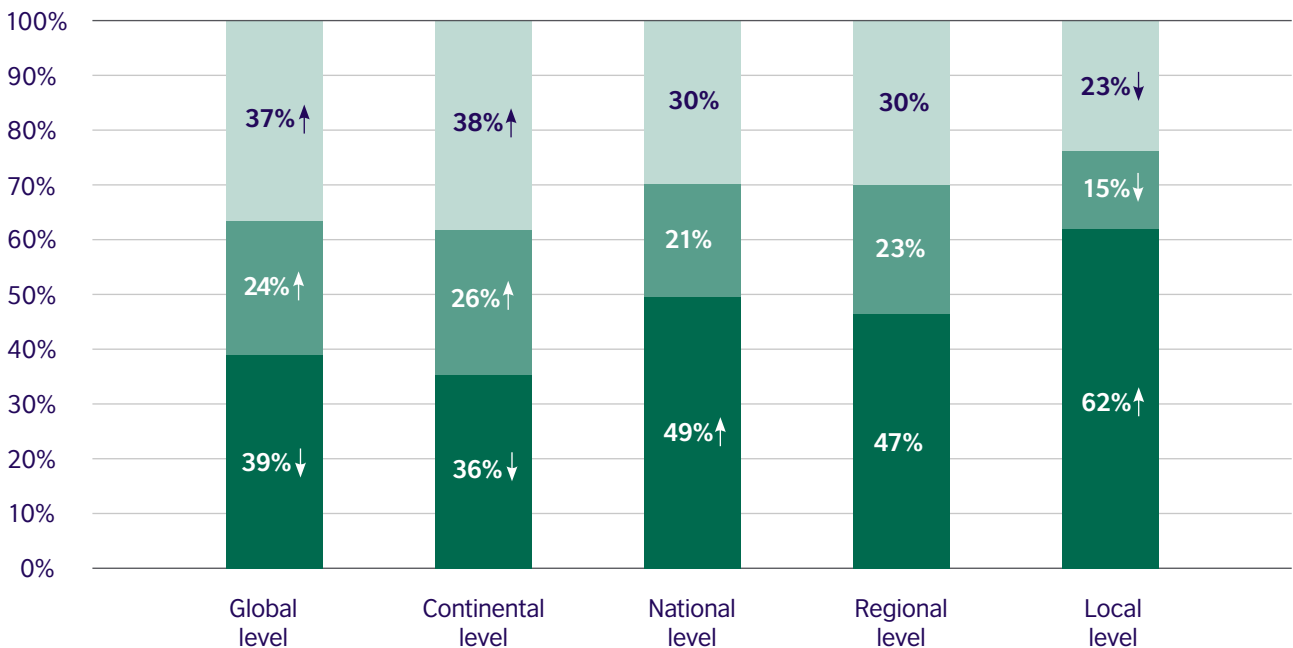
Despite these high levels of distrust and disengagement regarding politics, this is not discouraging political action and young people are committed to Bangladesh's future. Most of the young people who reported not wanting to leave Bangladesh (78 per cent) report being disengaged with politics. However, this disengagement does not equate to a lack of desire to contribute to the progress of Bangladesh. **The majority of young people (72 per cent) expressed their intention to vote** in the January 2024 general election, equal across those who would be willing to move and those who would not. Similarly, **a significant portion of young people who reported being disengaged with politics generally, believe it is important to be engaged with politics at various levels, including the global, national, regional, and local level** (Figure 38). 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.

Please see Annex 2 Deep Dive 4 for the key voting issues for young people.

“**The majority of young people (72 per cent) expressed their intention to vote in the January 2024 general election, equal across those who would be willing to move and those who would not.**”

Figure 38. Percentage of disengaged young people who believe it is important to engage on the following levels.*

- Important
- Neither unimportant nor important
- Not important



Base: Partial sample; Those who are somewhat or very disengaged, Weighted; base n = 2178.
 *Arrow indicates statistical significance.

There is a strong appetite for change and engagement among young people. Initiatives such as college-based political forums foster dialogue and awareness among the younger generation, paving the way for informed political participation.⁷⁰ Other significant indicators include **political engagement in the informal sphere where over half of young people actively engage in various political activities**, primarily at the grassroots level within their communities. This includes discussing politics with friends or family (24 per cent of young people), sharing an opinion about politics on social media (ten per cent) and taking part in a protest or demonstration (six per cent). This informal engagement underscores their commitment to effecting change locally.

“I think the youth will be encouraged to engage in politics, as we have seen in recent elections that anyone can be a political leader – actresses, sportsmen, everyone is now interested in becoming a member of parliament.” (Female respondent, 25-29, Rangpur, entrepreneur, Bachelor’s).

“During any disaster or problem, youth are often the first to aid affected people.” (Male respondent, 31-35, Barisal).

Only 15 per cent of young people reported not intending to vote, with only 19 per cent doing so out of disengagement or apathy. Among the remaining non-voters, the largest portion (approximately 37 per cent) cited reasons such as boycotting in protest (13 per cent), concerns about security or violence (12 per cent), or parental restrictions (12 per cent). Additionally, ten per cent indicated uncertainty about which party to vote for or dissatisfaction with all political parties.

Overall, these positive trends in political engagement among young people signify a significant commitment to civic participation and empowerment. This points towards a potential for change through active involvement within democratic structures.

2.5.2. Young people need an enabling environment that values their contributions and views young people as assets to engage in politics

In order to participate and engage in politics young people need an enabling environment for youth participation across the political system, where their contributions are valued and acted upon. They exhibit an eagerness for change and are not disinterested by high levels of distrust or perceptions of corruption. However, this cannot be taken for granted, and it is unclear whether this level of commitment and drive to affect change will continue if young voices are not foregrounded within national discourse. Currently over 50 per cent of young people feel their voices are not being heard. Encouraging youth participation in decision making, in a meaningful way, would validate their engagement, and reinforce their sense of political agency.

“It’s essential for people to feel that their leaders genuinely value them; their concerns should be taken seriously. This aspect is crucial for our well-being.” Deliberative sessions (Session 1).

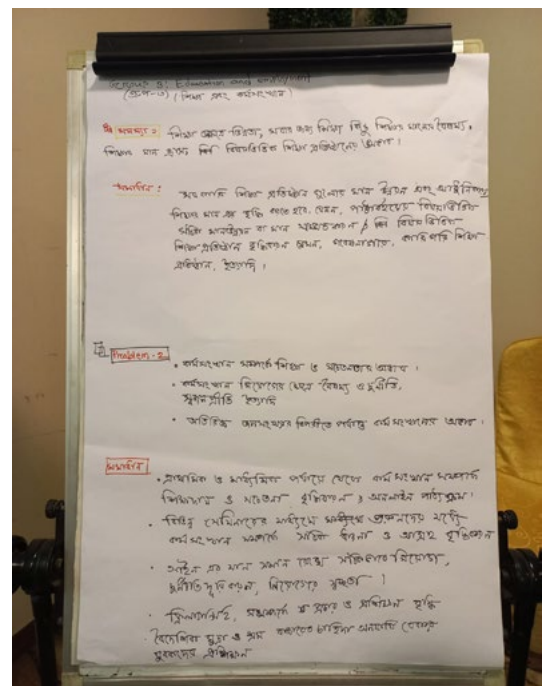
⁷⁰ See Annex 3 Case Study 05 for more on Political engagement in Barisal which provides a holistic picture of these competing concerns and desires for change.

Making political engagement more accessible would allow more young people to contribute to national politics. Many young people reported a need to make all kinds of political engagement more accessible, through removing barriers and recognition of pre-existing contributions made by the younger generations. **Potential reforms suggested including the lowering of the voting age, the provision of transport, as well as a psychologically safe environment around voting periods.** This would enable those put off voting by cost of transport or lack of access to a local polling station and encourage young people fearful of intimidation by others.

Political education is another route to encouraging engagement. Suggested reforms include the teaching and raising awareness of decision-making processes, communication and negotiation tactics, and public speaking. This would remove barriers to both understanding and engaging with the political process throughout their adult lives.

“The youth should be informed about democracy before politics. More political awareness should be created.”
Deliberative sessions (Session 2).

Figure 39. Deliberative sessions, Innovative Research and Consultancy, 2024



2.6. Youth voice in climate action

Headline findings:

- Despite high concern about climate change among young people in Bangladesh, only five per cent reported it to be the most important issue facing the world today, indicating a gap between concern and prioritisation.
- There are four distinct segments of youth attitudes towards climate change and action that have been identified, providing a spectrum of climate and political engagement to indifference: The 'Optimistic Climate Activists' (15 per cent), The 'Climate Advocates' (40 per cent), The 'Climate Anxious Pessimists' (seven per cent) and the 'Climate Indifferent' (39 per cent). There is a correlation between climate and political engagement among young people, with different segments demonstrating varying levels of concern, action, and optimism for the future.
- While most young people are concerned about climate change, there is a lack of understanding, with just under three-quarters (73 per cent) pointing to a need on education on the risk of climate change (45 per cent) and ways to take action (28 per cent).
- Tailored strategies are essential to engage different segments effectively, with approaches ranging from empowerment through action and community engagement to education and awareness campaigns, recognising the unique characteristics and preferences of each segment.

2.6.1. Young people are concerned about climate change, but gaps in knowledge impact its prioritisation

Bangladesh is classified as a “climate vulnerable country” and faces multiple climate change challenges including heat stress, drought, sea level rise, and an increase in natural disasters.⁷¹ Poor and vulnerable populations are most affected by these climate challenges,⁷² and it is estimated that by 2050 one in seven Bangladeshis will have been displaced due to climate change.⁷³ Recent research by the British Council found that **nine out of ten participants from Bangladesh agreed that climate change would be the biggest threat to their country in the coming years**, with one-fifth of the participants stating that persons with disabilities would be most affected by climate change, closely followed by women and girls.⁷⁴

⁷¹ British High Commission Dhaka. (2023). 'Bangladesh-UK Accord on Climate Change. www.gov.uk/government/news/bangladesh-uk-accord-on-climate-change

⁷² 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

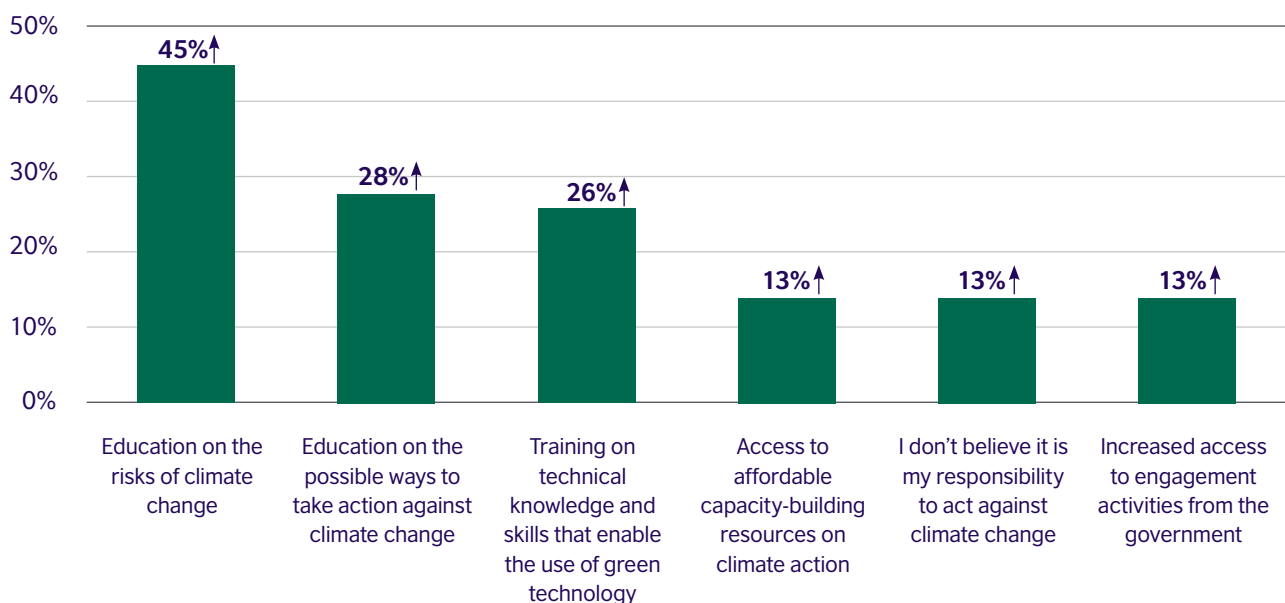
⁷³ The Climate Reality Project. (2021). How the Climate Crisis is impacting Bangladesh. www.climateRealityProject.org/blog/how-climate-crisis-impacting-bangladesh

⁷⁴ British Council. (2023). South Asia Research on Perceptions of Young people on climate Change and Action.

The accelerated impact of climate change is driving the growth of slums in Dhaka, presenting a crucial and alarming challenge for the country and its youth.⁷⁵ Raising awareness and educating young people and children about effects of climate change is integral to Bangladesh – with one in three children in Bangladesh (nearly 20 million) affected by climate change daily.⁷⁶ However, concerningly, a recent study by UNICEF examining young people’s experiences and perceptions of climate change **found that half of respondents (all were aged 15-24) were not able to explain climate change or global warming.**⁷⁷ Further, many young people lack awareness of the risks associated with climate change and its connection to global warming.⁷⁷ There is a critical need for education and awareness-building efforts to inform young people about the severity of climate change and motivate them to take sustainable action. Just under three-quarters (73 per cent) of young people in the Next Generation Bangladesh survey pointed to a need on education on the risk of climate change (45 per cent) and ways to take action (28 per cent). A further quarter (26 per cent) reported needing training on technical knowledge and skills to enable the use of green technology (Figure 40).

“Many people don’t even know about the risks of climate change. They don’t even know that the global warming problems we are facing is because of climate change.”
(Female respondent, 25-29, Dhaka, unemployed but not looking for a job).

Figure 40. Support people need to act against climate change.*



Base: Total sample; Weighted; base n = 3000. *Arrow indicates statistical significance.

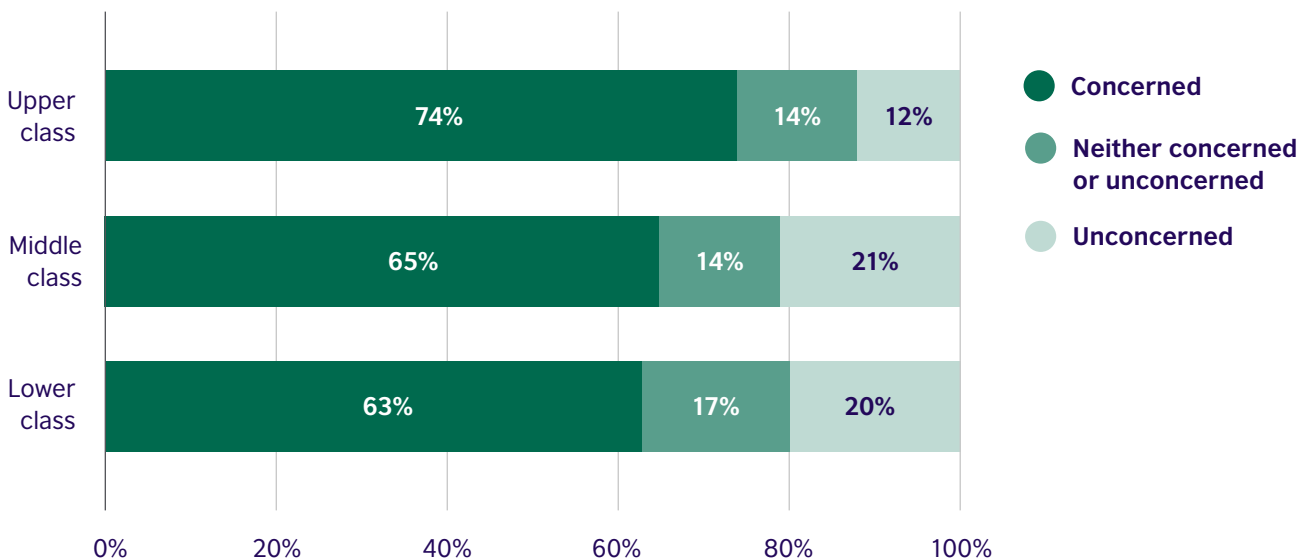
⁷⁵ Shamsuddin Illius. (2023). Climate Migrants escaping to Dhaka find that their new home is also sinking. <https://scroll.in/article/1042988/climate-migrants-escaping-to-dhaka-find-that-their-new-home-is-also-sinking>
⁷⁶ UNICEF. (2022). Bangladesh youth lead the call for urgent climate action at COP27. www.unicef.org/bangladesh/en/press-releases/unicef-bangladeshi-youth-lead-call-urgent-climate-action-cop27
⁷⁷ UNICEF. (2022). Bangladesh youth lead the call for urgent climate action at COP27. www.unicef.org/bangladesh/en/press-releases/unicef-bangladeshi-youth-lead-call-urgent-climate-action-cop27

Approximately six in ten young people in the Next Generation survey are concerned about the impact of climate change.⁷⁸ Whilst most young people, across all demographic variables, are concerned and taking some action against climate change, only five per cent reported it to be the most important issue facing the world today. Nevertheless, concern about climate change remains high and somewhat uniform across all socio-economic levels. For example, just under three quarters of upper-class respondents reported concern, compared to around two-thirds of middle- and lower-class respondents (see Figure 41).

Looking at gender, there was nearly no difference with nearly two-thirds of both male (63 per cent) and female (65 per cent) respondents concerned about climate change. Annex 3: Case Study 06 explores further how climate change impacts Khulna, the most likely division to report climate change as the most pressing issue in the community. This includes opportunities, challenges, and solutions.

“People don’t get to think much about the things that are not immediate, just like climate change. Everyone needs support in realising its consequences and the responsibilities we have towards the environment.” (Female Respondent, 25-29, Chattogram, Employed full time, Masters).

Figure 41. Concern about climate change by social class.



Total sample; Weighted; base n = 3000.

⁷⁸ This is in line with a recent study by UNICEF which found that, 70% reported that they were at least worried on some level about the future effects of climate change and 65% said that the governments should take the most action. 78% also said that their education was affected by climate change and 94% stated that they were keen to address it if they were given support for this. (UNICEF, 2021).

2.6.2. There are four distinct segments of youth attitudes towards climate change and action, providing a spectrum of climate and political engagement to indifference

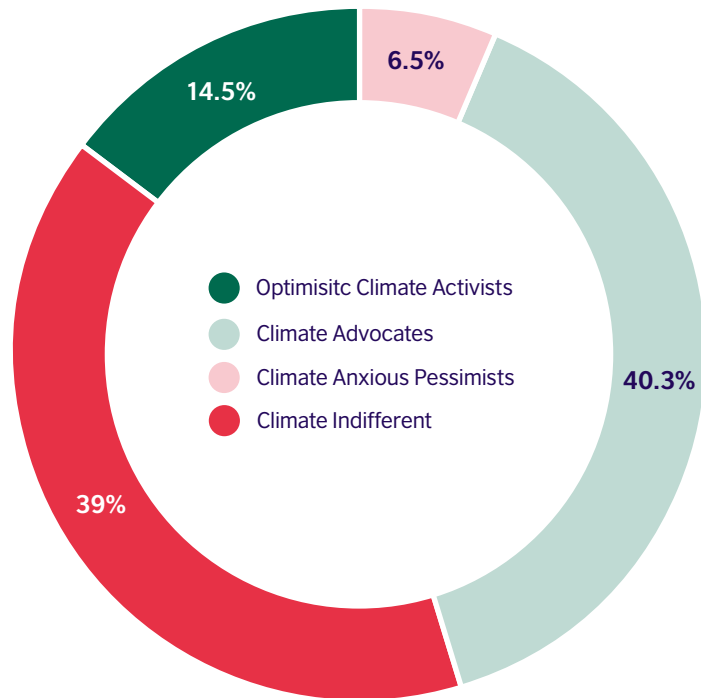
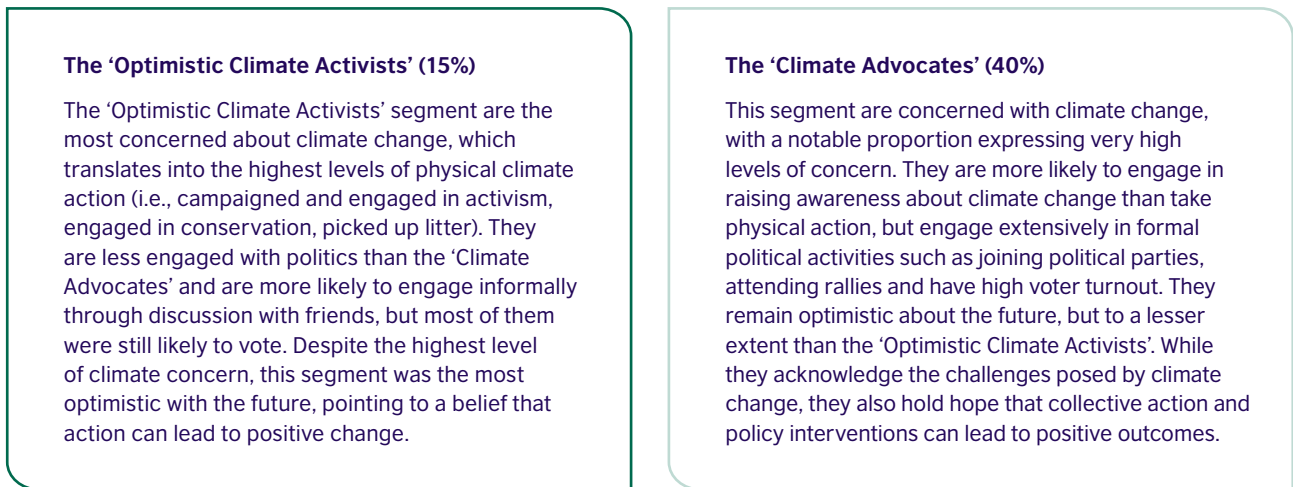
To support and optimise the participation and impact of young Bangladeshi voices in climate action, understanding the range and configuration of climate attitudes and behaviours is crucial to enable tailored strategies. To that end, Figure 42 below outlines the **profile and relative proportions of young people that fall into four segments, each of which is comprised of young people sharing similar climate attitudinal and behavioural characteristics**. Across the segments, there is correlation between climate and political engagement and optimism for the future, **revealing a spectrum of high engagement and action to indifference** (see Annex 2: Deep Dive 5, Table 3). Whilst there is variance in psychographic profiles, none of the segments are wholly unconcerned about climate change, representing a positive trend to tap into for future action.

Overall, understanding the diverse attitudes and behaviours within different segments of the population towards climate change is crucial for effective climate action and youth engagement. By recognising the nuances of each segment, stakeholders can tailor their outreach strategies to effectively engage youth in climate action initiatives (see Annex 2: Deep Dive 5). These segmentation insights allow for the development of targeted messaging, community-building efforts, and advocacy campaigns that resonate with the values, concerns, and aspirations of young people. Empowering youth to amplify their voices and take meaningful action on climate change not only fosters a sense of ownership and agency but also strengthens collective efforts towards building a more sustainable and resilient future for generations to come. Through inclusive and youth-centred approaches, we can harness the power of youth voices to drive positive change and create a more equitable and environmentally sustainable world.



Figure 42 outlines the profile and relative proportions of young people that fall into four segments, each of which is comprised of young people sharing similar climate attitudinal and behavioural characteristics.

Figure 42. Results of the Next Generation climate attitude segmentation.



The ‘Climate Anxious Pessimists’ (7%)

The ‘Climate Anxious Pessimists’ are the most likely to be somewhat concerned about climate change, but still engage in both awareness raising and physical action. This segment, however, is very unengaged with politics but conduct formal political activities like voting or attending political rallies, pointing more to disenchantment than apathy. This correlates with the highest rates of pessimism on all levels.

The ‘Climate Indifferent’ (39%)

This is the second largest segment, who are the most likely to be neither concerned nor unconcerned by climate change. They are the least likely to take physical action against climate change but engage in raising awareness. Reflecting their climate attitude, they are the most likely to be politically neutral, being neither engaged not unengaged, but still vote and discuss politics with friends. They are more likely to report pessimistically across all indicators, but not as highly as the ‘Climate Anxious Pessimists’.

Total sample; Weighted; base n = 3000

Conclusion and recommendations:

Young people are proactive in pursuing available pathways, whether it's in education, where they express confidence in its ability to prepare them for work and life, or in employment, where they exhibit a strong career focus. Similarly, despite disillusionment, they display an appetite for political pathways, eager to share their views and participate. However, challenges persist across all three spheres—education, employment, and political and civic engagement—hindering young people's ability to thrive and address issues important to them, including climate change, both in their present lives and future aspirations. Recommendations are as follows:

- 1. Develop teacher training:** Focus on modern teaching methodologies and essential soft skills integration, such as presentation, critical thinking, negotiation skills, and subject-specific knowledge, particularly in regions like Chittagong and Dhaka with concerns about teaching quality.
- 2. Expand access to technical and vocational education programmes:** Build partnerships with industry leaders, vocational training institutes, and development sector actors, particularly focused on regions like Dhaka, Khulna, Rangpur, Sylhet, and Barisal.
- 3. Enhance English courses with employability skills:** Integrate resume writing, interview skills, and workplace communication into English language programmes to equip students with essential job market skills alongside language proficiency.
- 4. Implement gender-responsive employment policies:** Address barriers faced by young women, including social stigma and family responsibilities, through cross-collaborative efforts between government ministries, CSOs, NGOs, and private sector industries.
- 5. Integrate civic education into school curricula:** Equip young people at secondary and higher education levels with knowledge and skills for active citizenship, including critical thinking, developing arguments, and legal knowledge for initiating change.
- 6. Foster genuine interaction between local leaders and young people:** Demonstrate sincere interest in youth issues and involve them in community matters, amplifying successful case studies of effective community leadership.
- 7. Integrate climate change education:** Offer vocational training programmes, within the school curricula, on green technology to reach a wide audience of young people.

Chapter 3

Potential



Summary:

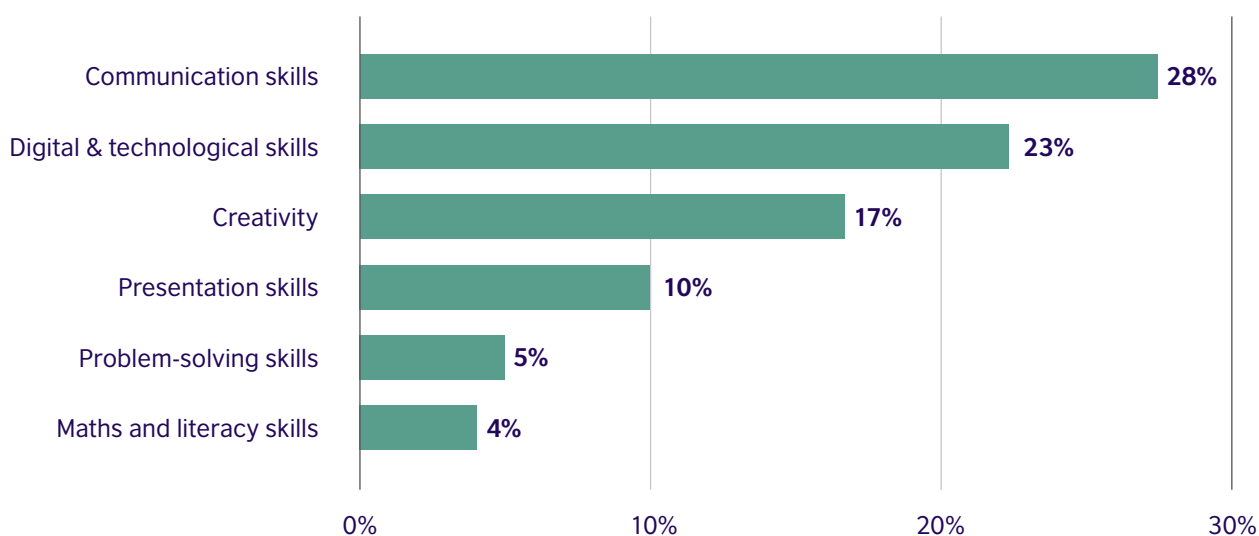
Career readiness & entrepreneurship

Career readiness

In Bangladesh, despite the prevailing dominance of informal employment, significant shifts are underway within the business landscape, driven by digitisation and integration with the international market. There is a growing demand across businesses for graduates with proficient communication skills, English language proficiency, and cultural relations skills. However, only five per cent of young people reported fluency in English, despite an overwhelming majority (79 per cent) acknowledging its importance.

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).

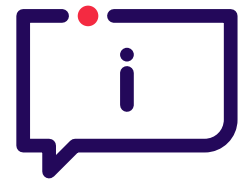
Young people prioritise soft skills and cultural relations when it comes to employment skills:



To unlock the potential of NEET youth, holistic support packages that encompass a range of interventions are needed. This includes practical training for in-demand skills, career and employment counselling, internships, and vocational training. Younger NEET respondents (aged 18-24) are more likely to value apprenticeships and internships (14 per cent), likely due to a lack of previous work experience.

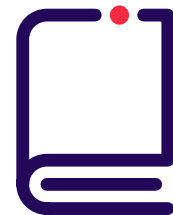
However, support must also consider the systemic issues facing NEET youth and provide mental health support, systemic well-being, and gender and disability sensitive modules.

79%



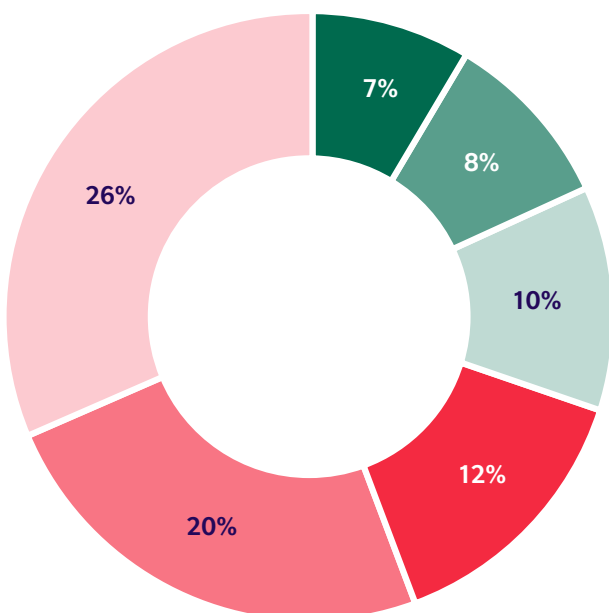
Acknowledge the importance of English language skills

5%



Reported fluency in English

What support is needed as young person looking for employment?

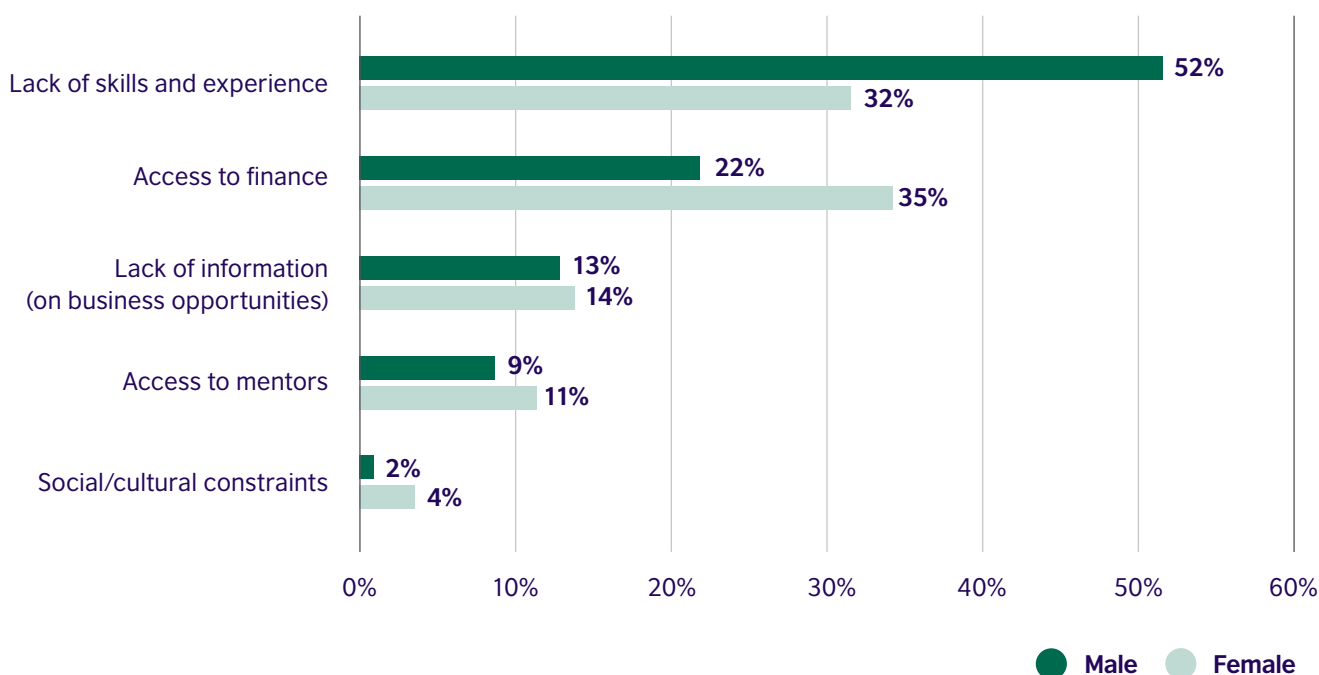


- Increased availability of information on skills
- Mentorship support
- Vocational training
- Apprenticeships and internships
- Career & employment counselling
- Practical training for in-demand skills

Entrepreneurship

Entrepreneurship is a promising avenue for young people, with 44 per cent reporting interest in starting a business in the next five years. However, this appetite is gendered, and influenced by income class. Only 35 per cent of young women are interested in entrepreneurship, compared to 54 per cent of young men. Barriers to entrepreneurship are also gendered. The largest barrier for both urban and rural young women to start a business is access to finance (35 per cent), coupled with a lack of skills and experience (32 per cent overall; 31 per cent rural; 36 per cent urban). Over half of young men point to lack of skills and experience (52 per cent overall; 58 per cent urban; 51 per cent rural).

In addition to difficulties in access to finance, patriarchal societal norms and cultural expectations continue to hinder women's ability to pursue entrepreneurial ventures.



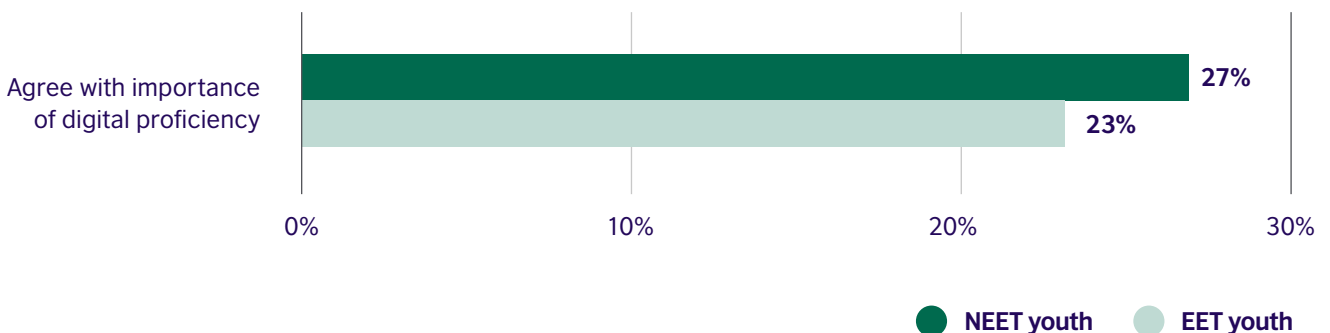
Digitalisation & digital literacy

Digitisation as an enabling factor

Three significant opportunities emerge from the digitisation wave in Bangladesh: freelancing, breaking gender barriers in entrepreneurship, and enhancing political engagement.

In an increasingly digitalised world, digital literacy and essential tech skills are indispensable for accessing employment opportunities. NEET youth are more likely to recognise digital and technological skills as key to employment than their EET counterparts (27 per cent vs 23 per cent), but NEET youth require support in developing these skills to navigate the digital landscape and participate effectively in the workforce.

Freelancing presents a significant opportunity for the next generation. The collective yearly earnings of freelancers amount to approximately US \$150 million, showcasing the substantial economic impact of the digital workforce in Bangladesh, and potential for significant growth. This trend is particularly empowering for young women, who make up nine per cent of the 650,000 freelancers in Bangladesh. Particularly for women from conservative backgrounds, who view freelancing as a flexible and socially acceptable employment avenue, particularly post-marriage. However, there is a lack of knowledge on how to pursue freelancing.



Although we learned about freelancing from our teachers, there is now a lack of experienced mentors in this field. Consequently, there is a gap in our knowledge, and few people are aware of freelancing opportunities.

Female respondent, Deliberative session participant

Social media platforms offer significant opportunities for women entrepreneurs to establish online businesses with minimal investment. They serve as marketplaces for selling products, creating employment opportunities, and overcoming traditional barriers to women’s economic participation.

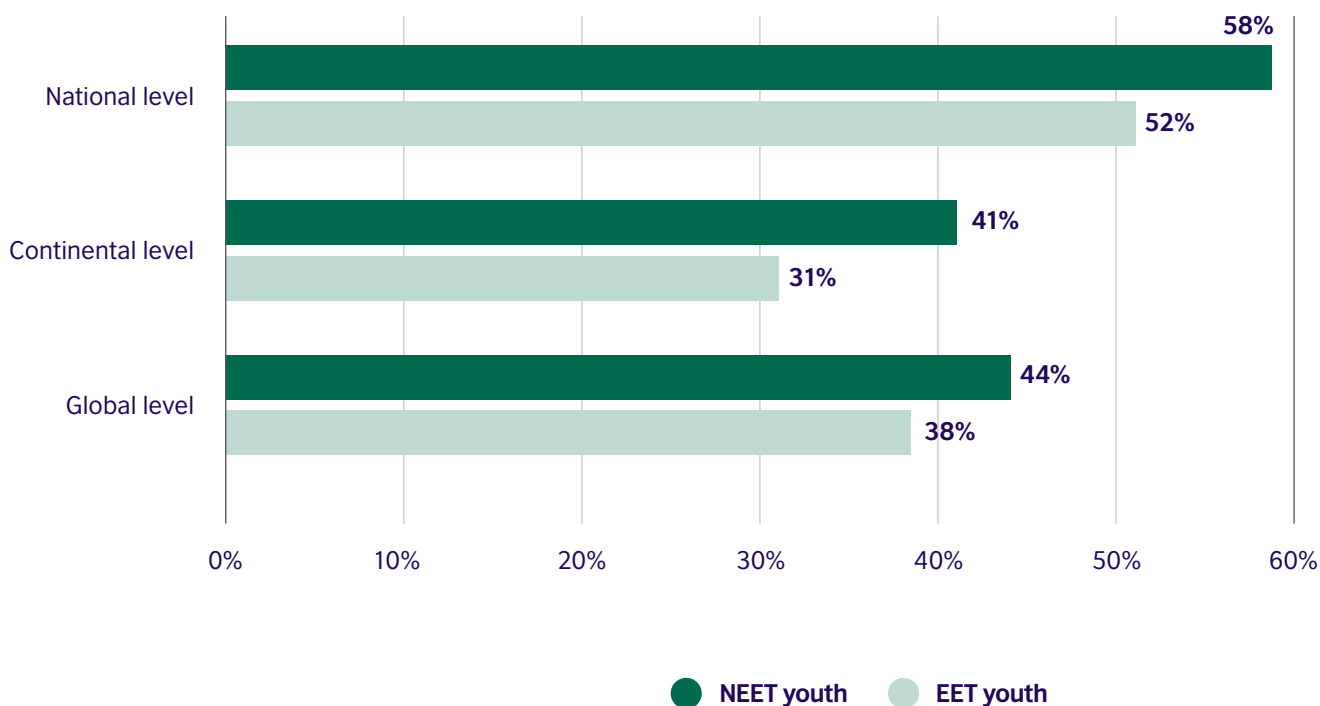
While digital platforms offer a low-cost entry into business, the lack of digital marketing knowledge and social media operations skills poses obstacles to sustaining online businesses. Indeed, young women increasingly recognise the importance of digital proficiency, at a higher rate than young men.

Another key opportunity offered by increased digitisation is its ability to facilitate political engagement. Social media and online platforms are widely considered vehicles for youth voice and political engagement, but there is a need for safe spaces and constructive dialogue.



1 in 3 urban young women reported digital and tech skills as the most important for employment.

Internet users are in general more likely to be engaged in politics at all levels compared to non-internet users:



Digitalisation, digital literacy & recommendations

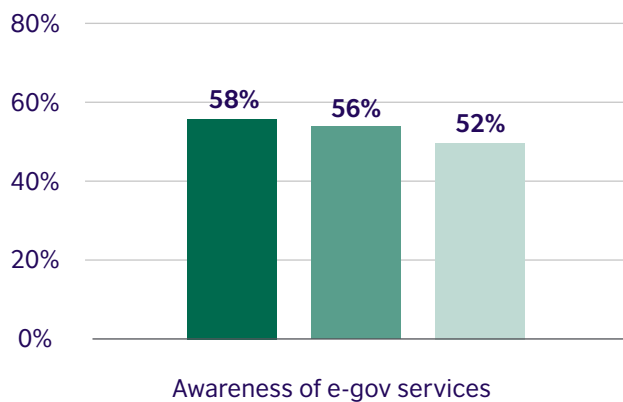
E-gov services

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.

More than half of young people are aware of the launch of these services and have used them (53 per cent), with the highest levels observed among the 18-24 age group (58 per cent), young women from urban areas (58 per cent), young rural men (59 per cent), and those with higher levels of education. Interestingly, factors such as internet usage and geographical location had relatively minor impacts on respondents' awareness of these services.

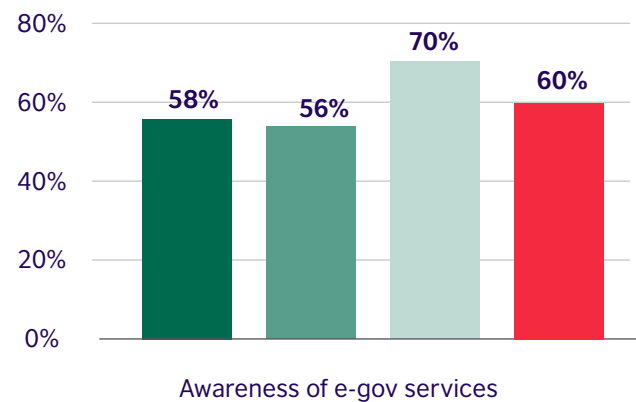
Urban youth used the Online Birth Registration system more frequently (81 per cent) than rural youth (74 per cent), with e-health services more commonly used by rural women (15 per cent) compared to urban women (nine per cent).

Age:



● 18-24 ● 25-30 ● 31-35

Educational attainment:



● Less than primary ● Bachelor's
● Lower secondary ● Master's

Recommendations

The chapter emphasises taking a holistic, systems approach to skills development, entrepreneurship support, and digital inclusion policies to equitably unlock the immense potential of Bangladesh's youth for driving sustainable economic growth. Below is a snapshot of the recommendations derived from the insights presented in Chapter 3 – they can be found in further detail in Chapter 4 'Conclusions and recommendations'.

1. Include mental health support and systemic well-being in NEET youth support:

Offer accessible mental health services, community-based programs, peer support networks, financial assistance, specialised training for professionals, and public awareness campaigns to destigmatise mental health issues.

2. Enhance digital literacy: 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.

3. Expand digital infrastructure in rural areas: Subsidise IT services, expanding 4G mobile coverage, and provide public internet facilities, particularly in regions with low internet usage. Ensure equitable access to internet usage in digital literacy and ICT programs, considering regional disparities in internet access and educational attainment.

4. Bridge the gender gap in digital access: Launch targeted programs 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.

5. Tailor financial support initiatives for young entrepreneurs, especially women:

Create dedicated funds or grant programs and offer preferential loan terms from financial institutions.

6. Enabling environment for entrepreneurship:

Cultivate family and community support networks for youth entrepreneurship, particularly in rural areas, through awareness programs, 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.

7. Support Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (SMEs):

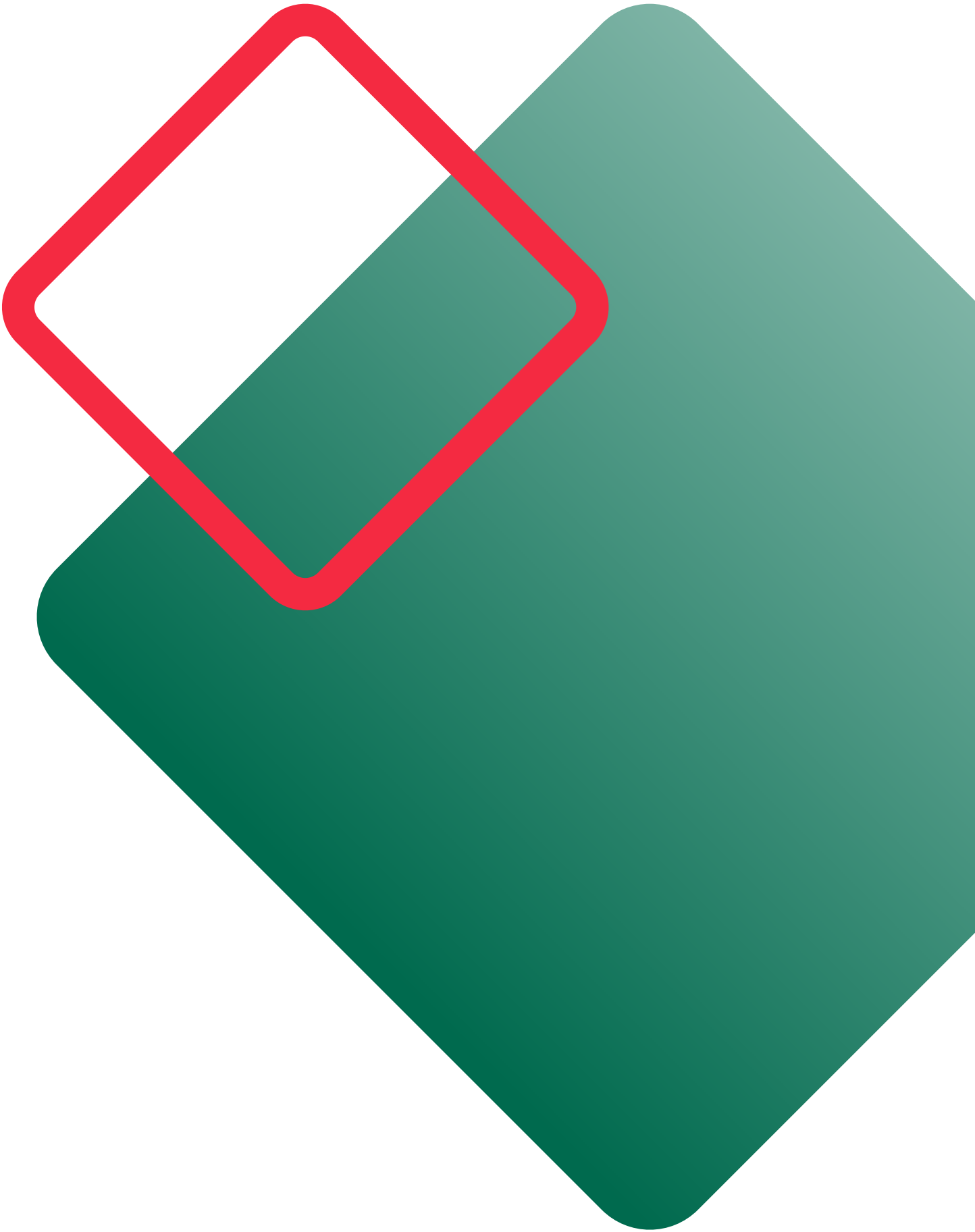
Design policies to support SME growth, including tax incentives, regulatory reforms, and access to finance, in collaboration with industry experts and stakeholders.

8. Develop a digital Ethical Code and guidelines:

Protect freedom of expression and reduce online harassment, aligning with objectives of the National Youth Action Plan for constructive social participation.

9. Utilise popular social media platforms:

Use 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.



3. Potential

This chapter focuses on unlocking the potential of young people and maximising their contributions to society. It explores the role of education in preparing young people for employment, entrepreneurship, and the role of digitisation and digital literacy in unlocking a progressive Bangladesh

3.1. Career readiness: soft skills and cross-cultural communication

Headline findings:

- NEET youth face a myriad of barriers to education, employment, and social inclusion, stemming from various economic, social, and structural factors. While initiatives targeting practical skills training, career counselling, mental health support, and digital literacy are essential components of any support package for NEET youth, it is crucial to acknowledge that no one-size-fits-all solution exists.
- Significant shifts are underway within the business landscape, driven by the increasing integration with the international market, largely spurred by digitisation. There is a growing demand across businesses for graduates to be equipped with proficient communication skills, English language, and cultural relations skills.
- Digital literacy and essential tech skills are vital for NEET youth to access employment opportunities in the digital age. Focusing on these areas, along with soft skills development, is essential for equipping them with the necessary tools for success in today's job market.

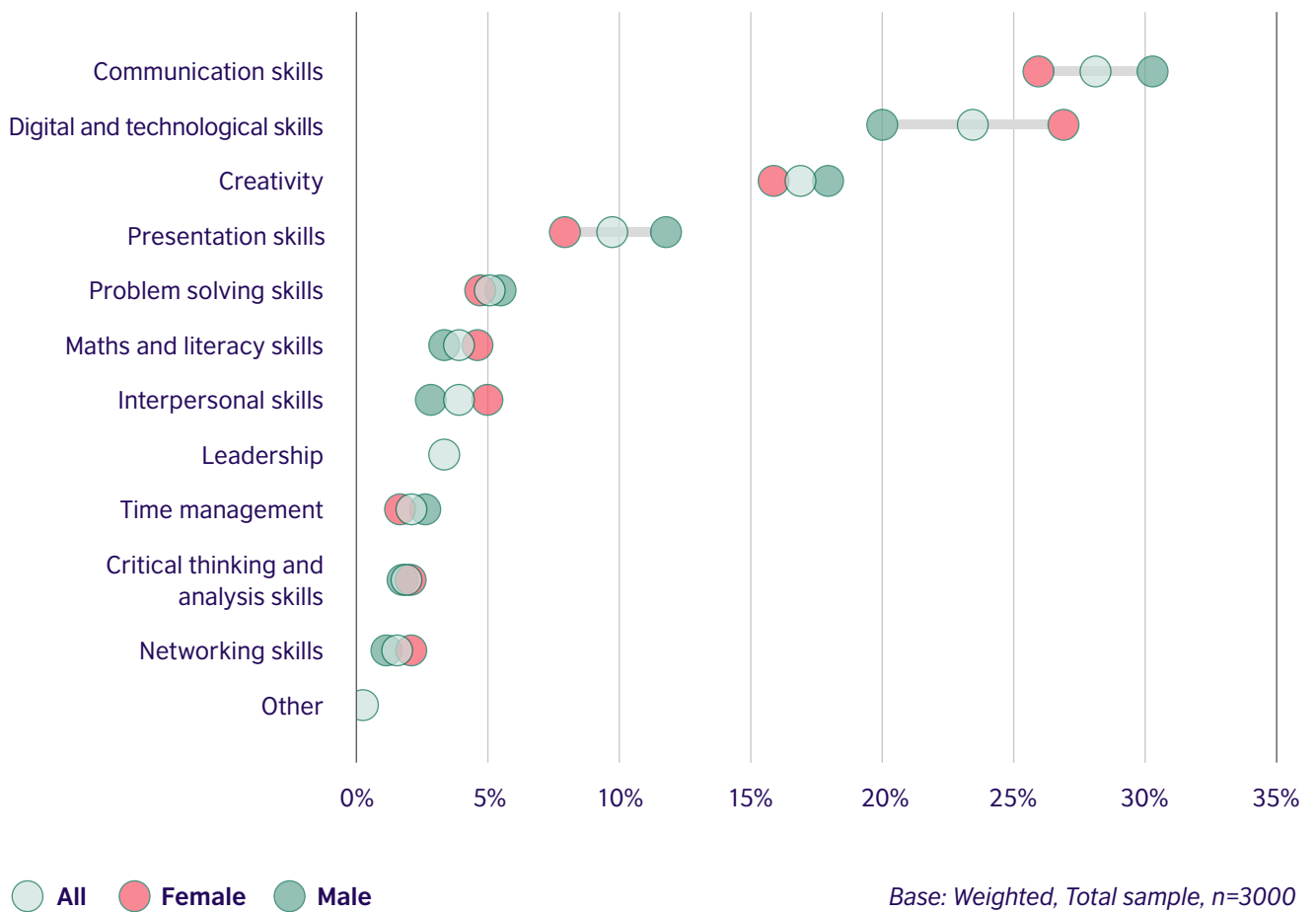
3.1.1. Within a globalised business landscape enabled by digitisation, soft skills, English language, and cultural relations are increasingly important

In Bangladesh, despite the prevailing dominance of informal employment, **significant shifts are underway within the business landscape, driven by the increasing integration with the international market, largely spurred by digitisation.** However, amidst a surplus of young workers, employers are grappling with a notable scarcity of high-skilled individuals, prompting them to cast their nets overseas in search of talent and enticing candidates with lucrative benefit packages.⁷⁹

Labour market experts, consulted for insights in this study, **underscored a growing demand across businesses, whether domestically oriented or international, for graduates equipped with proficient communication skills** (Key Informant Interview, Market Expert). Of particular importance are skills in English language and presentation skills, which are deemed indispensable for navigating the complexities of global commerce. This need is well recognised by young people themselves, with soft, transferable skills such as communication (28 per cent) ranking highest in importance across the sample (see Figure 43), especially among those with Master's degrees (40 per cent) and young men (30 per cent), followed by creativity (17 per cent), presentation skills (ten per cent), and problem-solving abilities (five per cent).

⁷⁹ Jamal, E. O. (2023, February 11). *Creating conditions for our youths to prosper*. The Daily Star. www.thedailystar.net/supplements/32nd-anniversary/towards-smart-bangladesh/news/creating-conditions-our-youths-prosper-3244686

Figure 43. What general skills do you think are most important when it comes to employment?



As Bangladesh’s economy becomes increasingly intertwined with global markets, the ability to effectively communicate across cultural and linguistic divides has emerged as a pivotal asset for both businesses and professionals. Graduates entering the workforce are expected to possess robust English language skills to facilitate international transactions, interact with foreign clientele, and engage in global collaborations. However, only five per cent of young people surveyed reported fluency in English, despite an overwhelming majority (79 per cent) acknowledging its importance. Moreover, in this evolving business landscape, the significance of presentation skills cannot be overstated. The capacity to articulate ideas persuasively, convey messages effectively, and deliver compelling presentations is indispensable for professionals seeking to leave a lasting impact in both local and global contexts.

As Bangladesh’s business landscape evolves, it is imperative for graduates to refine their communication and presentation skills to excel in a global market marked by connectivity and competition. Equipping themselves with these vital skills positions graduates as key contributors to the nation’s ongoing prosperity and success on the global stage. Understanding and remedying the various trends and disparities in youth preparedness for employment is crucial for fostering inclusive and sustainable economic growth in Bangladesh. Through targeted interventions addressing educational disparities, enhancing practical skill development, and promoting equal opportunities, policymakers and stakeholders can empower the country’s youth to navigate and succeed in the dynamic and competitive employment landscape.

3.1.2. Support for NEET youth needs to take a holistic, systems approach to address systemic causes

In Bangladesh, as in many other countries, the issue of NEET (Not in Education, Employment, or Training) youth presents a multifaceted challenge that requires a comprehensive response. NEET youth face a myriad of barriers to education, employment, and social inclusion, stemming from various economic, social, and structural factors. Addressing the needs of NEET youth necessitates a holistic approach that recognises the interconnectedness of their challenges and provides a range of support services tailored to their diverse needs and circumstances.

While initiatives targeting practical skills training, career counselling, mental health support, and digital literacy are essential components of any support package for NEET youth, it is crucial to acknowledge that no one-size-fits-all solution exists. Each NEET individual comes with unique experiences, backgrounds, and challenges that require personalised interventions and support mechanisms. Therefore, a holistic support package for NEET youth must encompass a range of interventions that address their varied needs and circumstances.

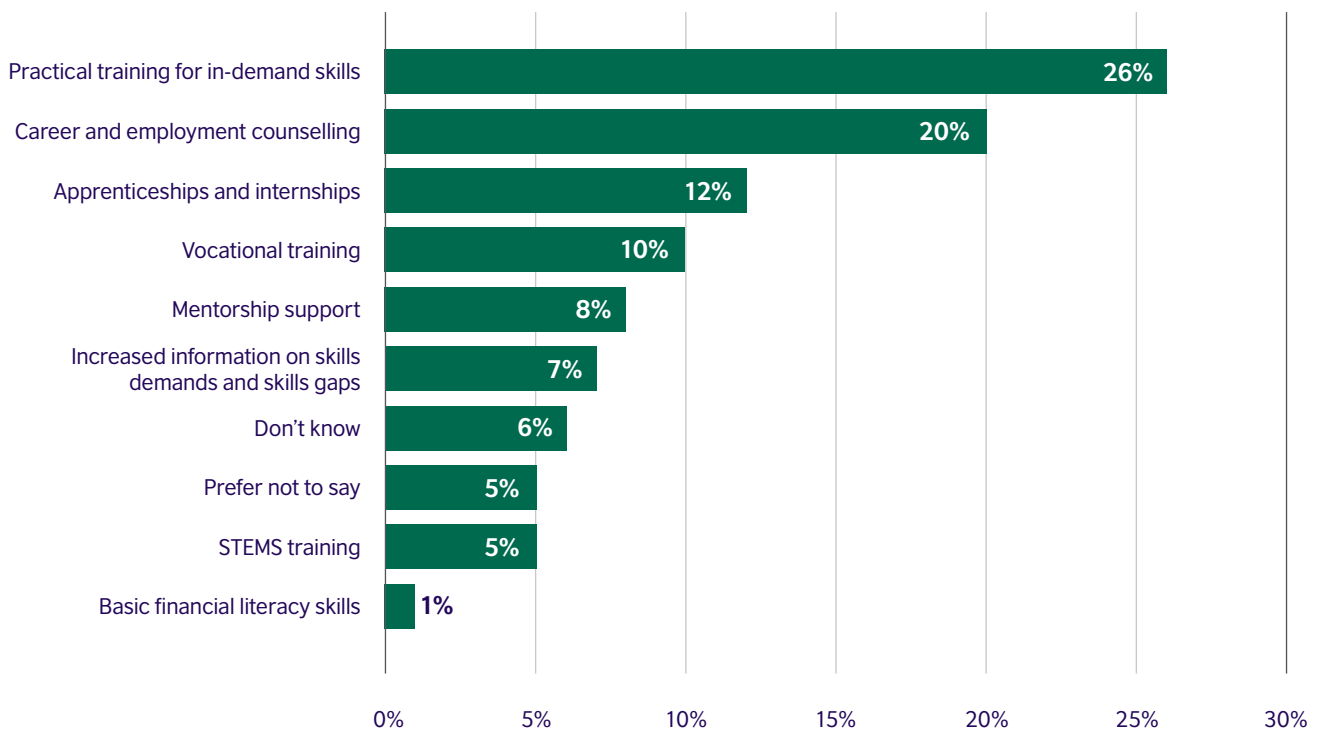
Developing practical training for in-demand skills

Practical training tailored to in-demand skills emerges as a crucial need for NEET youth seeking employment. With just over a quarter (26 per cent) of respondents prioritising this support, there is a recognition of the importance of aligning skill development with market demand (see Figure 44). Addressing oversaturated job markets and fostering balance in career pursuits requires targeted training programmes to equip NEET youth with the expertise necessary for meaningful employment. Younger NEET respondents (aged 18-24) are more likely to value apprenticeships and internships (14 per cent), likely due to a lack of previous work experience, or are more likely to report they ‘do not know’ (12 per cent), suggesting a need for more information.

Key informant interviews with market experts revealed that private sector organisations in Bangladesh are generally reluctant to offer internships, citing concerns about confidentiality and the perceived lack of benefits from short-term internships. While some organisations, notably in the banking sector, have internship programmes, many local corporate bodies are reluctant to participate. However, there are opportunities to design longer-term internship programmes and establish partnerships between technical colleges and industries. By offering apprenticeships and internships in collaboration with private sector organisations, stakeholders can provide NEET youth with hands-on experience and practical skills training opportunities aligned with market demands.

“The industry’s argument is that short term internships of a few weeks are not beneficial for them, they want a long-time, they want one year.” (Key informant interview, market expert).

Figure 44. What type of support do you feel are most needed as a young person seeking employment?



Base: Total sample: Weighted base, n = 3000.

Career and employment counselling

While over four in ten (46 per cent) NEET youth received career guidance at their last educational institution, additional support in the form of career and employment counselling was highlighted by one in five (20 per cent) NEET youth as the most needed support. This counselling serves to broaden horizons, guiding young individuals in exploring diverse career paths beyond conventional options. Despite receiving career guidance, the prevalence of NEET youth underscores the need for more comprehensive counselling services that address individual aspirations, skills assessment, and career planning. By providing insights into various career opportunities and facilitating access to training programmes, counselling can empower NEET youth to make informed decisions about their future and navigate the complex landscape of employment opportunities effectively.

“Proper career counselling and finding one’s area of interest is essential. There are many youngsters who are turning to so-called popular careers for which they may not have the interest or skills.”
 (Male respondent, 30-35, Dhaka, entrepreneur).

Mental health support and systemic well-being

Recognising the link between NEET status, homelessness, and poor mental health, there is a pressing need for accessible mental health services and resources. NEET youth emphasise the importance of addressing broader well-being issues such as housing and financial stability to create a stable foundation for pursuing education and employment opportunities. Qualitative insights highlight the intersectionality of NEET status with mental health challenges, homelessness, and financial instability, emphasising the need for holistic support systems. By prioritising mental health support and systemic well-being, stakeholders can ensure the holistic development and resilience of NEET youth, fostering environments where they can thrive personally and professionally.

Digital literacy and essential tech skills

In an increasingly digitalised world, **digital literacy and essential tech skills are indispensable for accessing employment opportunities.** NEET youth are more likely to recognise digital and technological skills as key to employment than their EET counterparts (27 per cent vs 23 per cent), but NEET youth require support in developing these skills to navigate the digital landscape and participate effectively in the workforce. **The emphasis on digital literacy, essential tech skills, and soft skills development underscores the importance of equipping NEET youth with the tools necessary for success in the digital age.** Insights from the field highlight the disparity in digital skills among NEET youth, with a significant proportion lacking proficiency in basic digital competencies. By focusing on digital literacy initiatives and providing training in essential tech skills, stakeholders can empower NEET youth with the tools necessary for success in the digital age and enhance their employability in a rapidly evolving job market.

“Especially since the corona pandemic, all organisations are now dependent on technology. As children are studying ICT in the curriculum, Business Incubation Centres have been set up in universities, even the BPO sector of the country is currently exporting more than 100 million dollars, more than 50 thousand employment opportunities have been created, and six and a half lakh people are currently working in the ICT sector.” (Male respondent, 30-34, Chattogram, employed full time, lower secondary education).

Gender and disability sensitive modules

To ensure inclusivity and support, it is imperative to design gender and disability-sensitive modules that address the unique needs of diverse youth populations. Insights from young people in the online community⁸⁰ underscore the importance of promoting diversity and equity in education and training programmes to create an inclusive environment where all NEET youth, regardless of gender identity or disability status, have equal opportunities to thrive. The call for gender and disability sensitive modules reflects the need for tailored interventions that address the specific challenges faced by marginalised groups within the NEET youth population. By incorporating gender and disability-sensitive perspectives into programme design and implementation, stakeholders can create an inclusive environment where all NEET youth feel valued, supported, and empowered to pursue their educational and career aspirations.

Adopting a holistic approach that addresses not only the immediate barriers to education and employment, but also the underlying systemic issues that perpetuate NEET status is imperative. By recognising the complexity of the challenges faced by NEET youth and providing a comprehensive support package that encompasses various dimensions of their well-being, stakeholders can empower NEET youth to overcome barriers, realise their potential, and contribute meaningfully to society.

⁸⁰ As part of the Next Generation Bangladesh online community, young people were asked to co-create ‘Solution boards’, providing their recommendations on how to support NEET youth. Below is an example of a ‘Solution board’ created by a young woman in the online community, highlighting the intricacies of a systems level approach to supporting NEET youth.

3.2. Entrepreneurship

Headline findings:

- Over four in ten young people (44 per cent) express interest in starting a business within the next five years. However, appetite is gendered and influenced by social class, with young women and those in lower social classes significantly less interested.
- The largest barrier for both urban and rural young women to start a business is accessed to finance (35 per cent), coupled with a lack of skills and experience (32 per cent overall; 31 per cent rural; 36 per cent urban). Whereas over half of young men point to lack of skills and experience (58 per cent urban; 51 per cent rural).
- Patriarchal societal norms and cultural expectations continue to hinder women's ability to pursue entrepreneurial ventures.
- The dominance of large corporations in the physical, non-digital sector makes accessing markets and supply chains particularly difficult, so the digital economy presents significant opportunities for youth entrepreneurship to flourish in the online space.

3.2.1. Entrepreneurship is an exciting pathway for young people, but appetite and barriers to start a business are gendered

Entrepreneurship represents a promising avenue for youth empowerment and economic development in Bangladesh. **Over four in ten young people (44 per cent) express interest in starting a business within the next five years. However, appetite is gendered and influenced by social class.** Only 35 per cent of young women reported interest in entrepreneurship, compared to 54 per cent of men, and those in the upper social class reported significantly higher interest in starting a business compared to middle and lower social class respondents. The largest barrier for both urban and rural young women to start a business is access to finance (35 per cent), coupled with a lack of skills and experience (32 per cent overall; 31 per cent rural; 36 per cent urban), whereas over half of young men point to lack of skills and experience (58 per cent urban; 51 per cent rural) (Figure 45).

Figure 45. Barriers to starting a business by gender.



Despite the government's efforts to support entrepreneurship, including financial incentives and simplified registration processes, **patriarchal societal norms and cultural expectations continue to hinder women's ability to pursue entrepreneurial ventures.**⁸¹ In fact, only 4.5 per cent of businesses in Bangladesh are owned by women, despite women constituting 92 per cent of the informal sector workforce.⁸² In August 2023, the government of Bangladesh and the World Bank signed a \$300 million financing agreement to equip youth in rural areas of the country, especially women, people with disabilities, and ethnic minorities with the skills needed for employment and entrepreneurship, offering a promising avenue in the future.⁸³

“Bangladesh is globally recognised as the birthplace of microcredit...but women entrepreneurs still face obstacles to finance due to patriarchal, class-biased, and gender discriminatory societal norms.” (Female respondent, 18-24, Khulna, entrepreneur).

Market experts highlighted another challenge for young people pursuing their own business, with the **dominance of large corporations in the physical, non-digital sector making accessing markets and supply chains particularly difficult.** However, the digital economy presents significant opportunities, with youth entrepreneurship flourishing in the online space, which is further explored below.

“In Bangladesh there is a domination of corporations in the market – it is very difficult for entrepreneurs to grow. However, in the digital world, there is huge opportunity for youth entrepreneurship as it is a more open market, and young people can join both the domestic and international market.” (Key informant interview, market expert).

To foster youth entrepreneurship and overcome gender disparities, policymakers must prioritise youth-centric and gender-sensitive approaches. This includes revising policies to support SME growth, promoting digital literacy, and facilitating access to finance and mentorship opportunities for aspiring entrepreneurs. Furthermore, collaboration between government, private sector stakeholders, and civil society is essential to create a supportive ecosystem that empowers all aspiring entrepreneurs to succeed.

Case Study 08 in Annex 3 provides an overview of the challenges and opportunities for young entrepreneurs in Rajshahi, who indicated the highest interest in starting a business in the next five years. Solutions to increase youth entrepreneurship centre on spotlighting more success stories and mentors for young people, raising awareness and increased access to finance.

⁸¹ 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>

⁸² 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/>

⁸³ World Bank. (2023, August 27). *World Bank Helps 900,000 Rural Youth in Bangladesh with Better Employability and Entrepreneurial Opportunities*. World Bank. www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2023/08/27/world-bank-helps-900000-rural-youth-in-bangladesh-with-better-employability-and-entrepreneurial-opportunities

3.3. Digitalisation and digital literacy: focusing on the future

Headline findings:

- Despite the gendered digital divide, young women increasingly recognise the importance of digital proficiency, with nearly a third emphasising its necessity for employment (32 per cent).
- Freelancing is a burgeoning sector in Bangladesh and presents a significant pathway for economic growth of the country. Despite high levels of interest in freelancing as an opportunity, many young people pointed to a lack of knowledge on how to pursue the career.
- Despite digitisation presenting significant potential for young women across various avenues, like freelancing and entrepreneurship, challenges persist, notably in accessing basic training for online jobs, a lack of digital marketing knowledge and social media operations skills.
- Despite viewing social media as a vehicle for youth voice, facilitating direct interaction between leaders and youth to promote meaningful dialogue and collective action, there is a need for safe spaces and constructive dialogue in political expression online.
- Young people showed a positive level of awareness and use of e-gov services, with young women from urban areas (58 per cent) and young rural men (59 per cent) the most likely to be aware of these services. Internet use is not a strong determinant of awareness of e-gov services, meaning that other in-person means of spreading awareness about this service could be equally effective.

3.3.1. Digital skills are a key opportunity for young people, particularly NEET youth

In Bangladesh, the digital landscape is rapidly evolving, presenting both opportunities and challenges for young people entering the workforce, particularly young women. Despite a historical urban/rural digital divide, the majority of both urban and rural youth reported using the internet in the last three months, with only a 3-percentage-point difference (69 per cent urban; 66 per cent rural). This represents a significant opportunity to harness the connectedness of a young digital workforce.

“If someone knows how to work on the internet, they can find employment online... there is no chance of less opportunities now compared to our parents with the internet.” (Young man, 25-29, Barisal, politically engaged and employed full time).

Despite encouraging trends and policy ambitions for a future driven Bangladesh the country faces challenges in its digital infrastructure. **Bangladesh ranks low in terms of internet and download speeds, hindering the country's ability to fully leverage digital technologies for economic growth and social development.**⁸⁴ A UN report further highlights the pressing need for digital skills development, with 85 per cent of youth in Bangladesh lacking essential digital competencies.⁸⁵ Recent BIGD research in rural Bangladesh also found extremely low levels of digital skills and literacy, including amongst young people and young women.⁸⁶ In another vein, a recent survey of non-governmental employers in Bangladesh by the Centre for Policy Dialogue found that four in ten businesses report that due to an advancement in technology, their employees may need to acquire new skills over the next 12 months, signalling the need for continuing skill development.⁸⁷

The intersection of locality and gender on digital access and use is clear. In the Next Generation survey, urban women lead in internet usage, with about two-thirds (64 per cent) connected, while rural women lag behind, with just over half connected (53 per cent). **Nevertheless, young women increasingly recognise the importance of digital proficiency, with nearly a third emphasising its necessity for employment (32 per cent),** a sentiment echoed more strongly among women than men. This highlights the urgent need for targeted efforts to enhance digital access and upskill young women in this critical domain (see Annex 2: Deep Dive 6 for more).

In response to these challenges, Bangladesh is strategically advancing its digital infrastructure, aiming to harness the potential of AI technologies for national development. Initiatives encompass research, workforce skilling, digital infrastructure enhancement, digital job platforms, and ethical considerations.⁸⁸

3.3.2. A burgeoning freelance sector in Bangladesh presents a significant opportunity for the Next Generation, particularly young women

Currently, **the country boasts the world's second-largest freelancer workforce, primarily servicing foreign companies.** Bangladesh consistently ranks among the top countries preferred by employers and was the 8th largest exporter of online labour in 2023, as per a Payoneer survey.⁸⁹ The delivery of these services relies heavily on connectivity, presenting significant potential for growth. The collective yearly earnings of these freelancers amount to approximately US \$150 million, showcasing the substantial economic impact of the digital workforce in Bangladesh, and potential for significant growth. With AI and similar tools increasingly entering the employment landscape, particularly for freelancers, to continue a trajectory of growth, those engaged in the industry have to actively adapt and add skills to their resume.⁹⁰

Many young people in focus groups and interviews pointed to the potential of freelancing as an opportunity for young people but pointed to a lack of knowledge on how to pursue the career. Young people pointed to initial exposure to freelancing within educational settings, which provided a foundational understanding, yet the absence of experienced mentors post-education has created a noticeable knowledge gap. Without mentorship, individuals struggle to navigate the intricacies of freelancing and remain unaware of the full spectrum of opportunities available. To address this gap, it is crucial to establish mentorship programmes within educational institutions and professional networks. By connecting aspiring freelancers with experienced mentors, we can cultivate a supportive environment for skill development and knowledge sharing, ultimately empowering individuals to seize freelancing opportunities and thrive in the industry.

⁸⁴ Hossain Pakbir, M. M. (2023, March 7). *Digital literacy: the first step towards "Smart Bangladesh"* - Op-Ed - [observerbd.com](https://www.observerbd.com/news.php?id=410141). The Daily Observer.

⁸⁵ The Education Commission and UNICEF Education and Adolescent Development Programme Group. (2022). *Recovering learning. Are children and youth on track in skills development?* www.unicef.org/reports/recovering-learning.

⁸⁶ E.g. Very few could find simple information from a government website. BRAC Institute of Governance and Development. (2020). *Digital Literacy of Rural Households in Bangladesh*.

⁸⁷ Centre for Policy Dialogue. (2022). Skills gap and youth employment in Bangladesh.

⁸⁸ Daily Observer (2023). www.thedailystar.net/opinion/views/news/ushering-ai-bangladesh-3336826

⁸⁹ Clayton, R. (2023, February 25). *Top 10 Countries for Freelancers*. Payoneer Blog. <https://blog.payoneer.com/freelancers/top-10-freelancing-countries/>

⁹⁰ The Daily Star. (2024). Where is Bangladesh's Freelance market headed? www.thedailystar.net/anniversary-supplement-2024/bangladesh-the-world-stage/news/where-bangladeshs-freelance-market-headed-3543351.

“Although we learned about freelancing from our teachers, there is now a lack of experienced mentors in this field. Consequently, there is a gap in our knowledge, and few people are aware of freelancing opportunities.” (Female respondent, deliberative session participant).

Freelancing also provides a unique opportunity for young women, who make up nine per cent of the 650,000 freelancers in Bangladesh.⁹¹ This trend is **especially empowering for women, particularly those from conservative backgrounds, who view freelancing as a flexible and socially acceptable employment avenue, particularly post-marriage.**⁹²

“The Bangladesh government has arranged various types of employment for women, which is helping women to become self-reliant...In this age of online you can do any work at home very easily.” (Female respondent, 30-35, lower secondary education, self-employed / entrepreneur).

However, challenges persist, notably in accessing basic training for online jobs, limiting the full participation of many young women in the sector. Recognising these challenges, the government’s ICT Department launched the “Her Power” project, aimed at training 25,000 women across 130 upazilas by December 2024. Spearheaded by the Prime Minister, this initiative offers three months of practical training followed by a three-month business incubation period, equipping women with the skills and support needed to excel in freelancing.⁹³ With an investment of Tk 250 crore, this project underscores the government’s commitment to fostering gender-inclusive economic growth and narrowing workforce disparities.

A comprehensive policy approach is crucial to address the challenges young freelancers face and bridge the gap between education and the job market. The current educational framework falls short in equipping youth with essential tech skills, necessary for success in the digital era. Concerted efforts are needed to revamp educational curricula, promote IT skills training, and

foster an ecosystem conducive to innovation and entrepreneurship in the digital sector. By prioritising digital inclusion and skills development, Bangladesh can unlock the full potential of its youth and pave the way for a more prosperous future.

3.3.3. Digitisation can enhance political engagement, with social media acting as a vehicle for youth voice

Expanding youth voice through social media

Social media and online platforms are widely considered by young people as vehicles for young voices. Young people are keenly aware of the critical role that digital and technology-based infrastructure plays in promoting political and economic participation. By ensuring access to online platforms and technological tools, organisations can enable young people and NEET youth to participate in community development projects and collaborative problem-solving endeavours. Furthermore, **creating avenues for direct interaction between leaders and young individuals fosters meaningful dialogue and collective action, empowering young people to contribute positively to societal change.**

One young person highlighted the necessity of building a technology-driven infrastructure to facilitate the exchange of ideas between youth and community leaders through a centralised platform, emphasising the immediacy of uploading initiatives for broader engagement.

“We need to build a technology-based infrastructure to bring together the thoughts of young people and share their ideas with community leaders through a One Point Service Centre/Emergency Response Team. Such a platform should be completely technology based and any kind of initiatives should be uploaded there immediately.” (Male respondent, 25-29, Dhaka, employed, Bachelor’s).

⁹¹ Ghosh, D. (2022, April 2). *Why is there a lack of women in freelancing?* Dhaka Tribune. www.dhakatribune.com/opinion/longform/288322/why-is-there-a-lack-of-women-in-freelancing

⁹² Raysa, R. (2021, July 30). *Bangladeshi women freelancers are thriving.* The Daily Star. www.thedailystar.net/toggle/news/bangladeshi-women-freelancers-are-thriving-2140211

⁹³ Hossain, A. (2023, March 7). *Women freelancers, finding path to financial freedom.* The Daily Star. www.thedailystar.net/supplements/international-womens-day-2023/news/women-freelancers-finding-path-financial-freedom-3266071

There is a similarly strong belief in the importance of constructive dialogue and the need for safe spaces for political expression online. This includes safeguarding against threats and ensuring the security of online identities. Encouraging and protecting young people's online engagement is seen as essential for fostering an inclusive digital political discourse. Support for civic education initiatives which empower young people with the necessary knowledge and skills to engage in political discussions effectively is therefore necessary. This involves introducing fact-checking tools and partnering with reputable organisations to promote civic education and media literacy.

“Sometimes I do not share my opinion online because nowadays people are getting hacked, and many threats are faced. In order to engage young people online in politics, they must be protected and given an online site where they can express their views.” (Female respondent, 25-29, Chattogram, employed full time, upper secondary).

Despite the potential for social media to facilitate youth engagement, **there is a prevailing sentiment that young people's opinions on community issues are often disregarded or marginalised by community leaders and politicians.** This leads to disillusionment and disengagement among youth regarding the efficacy of sharing their views, even on social media. While acknowledging the opportunities presented by social media, some young people suggested face-to-face meetings with community leaders to address local problems and allow for more meaningful exchanges. This increases the likelihood of community leaders making public decisions which are informed by youth opinions.

3.3.4. The awareness and use of e-gov services is promising, but access varies by urbanity, age, educational attainment, and internet usage

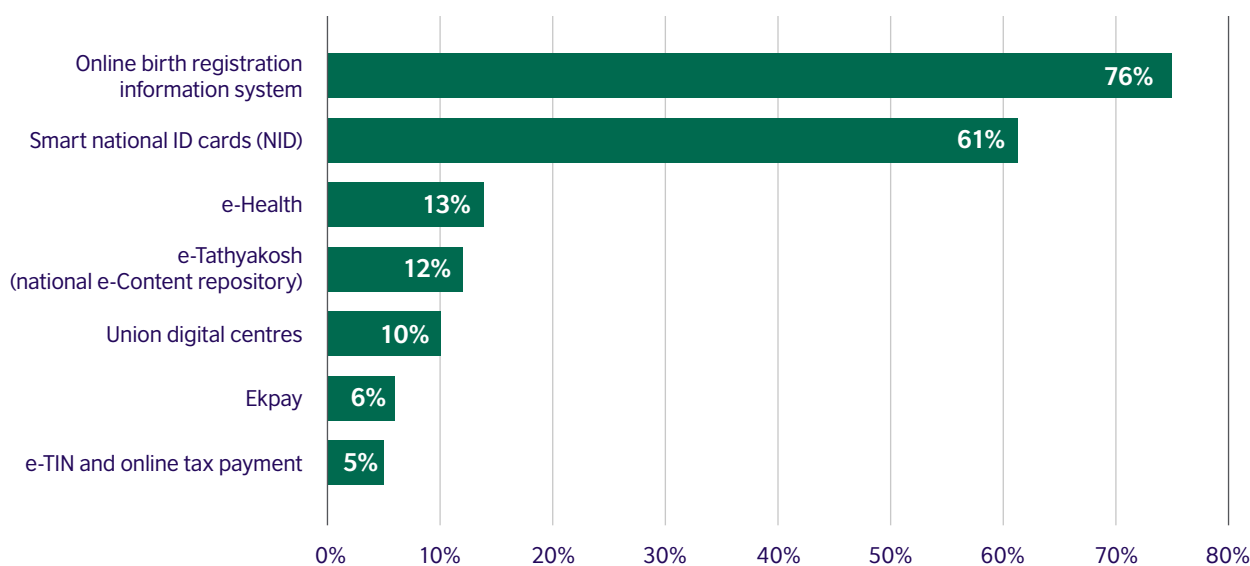
Bangladesh aims to transition towards more efficient, digital, and citizen-centric services as the country progresses. According to the UN E-Government Survey 2022, Bangladesh ranks 111th in the United Nations E-Government Development Index (EGDI). This position places it below Sri Lanka (95) and India (105), but ahead of Bhutan (115), Nepal (125), and Pakistan (150) among South Asian countries. Bangladesh has demonstrated steady progress in the EGDI over the last decade, rising from 148th place in 2014 (out of 193 countries). This improvement reflects the country's commitment to advancing in implementation of e-gov services.

Young people showed a positive level of awareness and use of e-gov services (Figure 46). Over half of respondents were aware of the launch of E-Government services, however those aged 18-24 (58 per cent) were most aware, followed by those aged 25-30 (56 per cent) and 31–35-year-olds (52 per cent). Higher educational attainment levels also increased the likelihood of e-gov service awareness. Six in ten (62 per cent) young people with Master’s and seven in ten (69 per cent) of those with Bachelor’s attainment were aware of these services. This lies in contrast to those with lower secondary education (just over 50 per cent) and those with less than primary education (46 per cent).

Differences in awareness between internet and non-internet users was interestingly low. Only four per cent more internet users (57 per cent) were aware of these services compared to non-internet users (53 per cent). This implies **that internet use is not a strong determinant of awareness and other in-person means of spreading awareness about this service could be equally effective.** Geography also has a small influence on awareness. Peri-urban youth are the least likely to be aware of the launch of e-gov services (45 per cent), compared to 58 per cent of rural youth and 54 per cent of urban youth. Over half of rural youth have used any of the e-gov services. **Young women from urban areas (58 per cent) and young rural men (59 per cent) are the most likely to be aware of these services.**

“**Differences in awareness between internet and non-internet users was interestingly low. Only four per cent more internet users (57 per cent) were aware of these services compared to non-internet users (53 per cent).**”

Figure 46. E-gov services used by young people.



Base: Total sample: Weighted base, n = 3000.

3.4. Enablers for empowerment: the potential of education

Young people in Bangladesh possess a wealth of talents, skills, and aspirations that can contribute to their empowerment and the betterment of society. Through active engagement and meaningful participation, youth voice can be amplified to address key issues and shape their opportunities for the future. Education serves as a powerful tool to empower youth and shape their holistic growth. Harnessing the following solutions, which were co-created with young people in the research, can effectively amplify youth voice across various domains of public life, and help to produce well-rounded, engaged citizens:

1. **Ensuring safety and freedom of speech in online political engagement:** Addressing concerns about safety in online political engagement and ensuring freedom of speech are crucial for encouraging young people to express their political opinions without fear of reprisal. Creating a safe environment for online discourse and respecting diverse opinions can foster meaningful political conversations through both regulation and awareness raising.
2. **Supporting youth employment, entrepreneurship, and community projects:** Developing programmes that support youth employment, entrepreneurship, and community projects can empower young people to address local issues and contribute positively to society. Providing vocational training, mentorship, and funding for youth-led initiatives can facilitate their active participation in community development.
3. **Improving accessibility and quality of technical and STEM education:** Recognising the increasing need for STEM skills in the workforce for young people and towards a modern Bangladesh, and initiatives to enhance the quality of technical and STEM teaching is crucial, along with increasing the number of subject-specific technical education institutions to enable wider access to young people from different backgrounds.
4. **Raising knowledge and understanding of political and community engagement through civic education:** Advocating for civic education as a required part of school curricula can enhance young people's understanding of government functions and their responsibilities as citizens. These efforts aim to equip the next generation with the knowledge and skills needed for informed decision-making. Initiatives such as leadership development programmes and mentorship opportunities can help young people understand the political process and their role in societal development.
5. **Effective engagement platforms and meeting young people's needs:** Leveraging targeted social media platforms (such as Instagram, TikTok) with digestible and shareable content, partnering with local youth organisations, and collaborating with educational institutions are effective strategies for engaging young people in political processes. Providing accessibility, representation, education, support networks, and reducing age-related barriers are essential to encourage their active participation.
6. **Media and tech literacy:** Encouraging programmes that teach people to understand and use various forms of media so that the next generation may make better decisions based on accurate information. Leveraging the effective use of technology online platforms, such as petitions, crowdfunding, and advocacy websites to initiate and support campaigns. Virtual town halls, webinars, and online forums to connect with leaders and peers.

These solutions underscore the importance of recognising and amplifying youth voice in Bangladesh, empowering young people to contribute meaningfully to their communities and shape their own futures. Through collaborative efforts and targeted interventions, we can create an environment where the talents, skills, and aspirations of young people are valued and nurtured for the collective benefit of society.

Conclusion and recommendations:

The potential of young people in Bangladesh is considerable, and they are leveraging digitisation to overcome barriers and challenges in employment, education, and political engagement. Social media and online platforms serve as vehicles to support NEET youth in finding employment, empower women in entrepreneurship, and enable young Bangladeshis to voice their opinions in the political arena. Young people are keen on honing a diverse set of skills for their future endeavours, ranging from essential soft skills like communication and creativity to proficiency in English language, digital literacy, and technological know-how. These competencies are perceived as vital for securing employment opportunities amidst the evolving business landscape in Bangladesh, driven by increasing demand from both youth and businesses alike. Yet, addressing discrepancies in digital resource accessibility and bridging the gap between the skills young people require and those provided by their education is imperative for ensuring equal opportunities for all to fulfil their potential.

1. **Include mental health support and systemic well-being in NEET youth support:** Offer 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.
2. **Enhance digital literacy:** 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.
3. **Expand digital infrastructure in rural areas:** Subsidise IT services, expanding 4G mobile coverage, and provide public internet facilities, particularly in regions with low internet usage. Ensure equitable access to internet usage in digital literacy and ICT programmes, considering regional disparities in internet access and educational attainment.
4. **Bridge the gender gap in digital access:** 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.
5. **Prioritise practical tech training:** Invest in skill development programmes tailored to high-demand sectors like IT, Automation/IoT, AI, e-commerce, and renewable energy, partnering with industry leaders to ensure relevance and effectiveness.
6. **Tailor financial support initiatives for young entrepreneurs, especially women:** Create dedicated funds or grant programmes and offering preferential loan terms from financial institutions.
7. **Enabling environment for entrepreneurship:** 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.
8. **Support Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (SMEs):** Design policies to support SME growth, including tax incentives, regulatory reforms, and access to finance, in collaboration with industry experts and stakeholders.
9. **Develop a digital Ethical Code and guidelines:** Protect freedom of expression and reduce online harassment, aligning with objectives of the National Youth Action Plan for constructive social participation.
10. **Utilise popular social media platforms:** Use 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.

Chapter 4

Conclusion & recommendations



Conclusion and policy recommendations

The following recommendations stem from insights gathered across the research, the Next Generation Task Force, and the perspectives of young people who engaged in the research and deliberative sessions. The recommendations begin with support to develop young people's economic and educational lives, including skills development, entrepreneurship, NEET youth and digitisation and digital literacy. This is followed by recommendations to empower youth voice across political and civic engagement, and in global issues such as climate change and action and fostering gender inclusion.

Key factors to consider across all recommendations:

- **Gender inclusivity:** Recognising the intersectionality of gender with youth outcomes is imperative.
- **Balancing power dynamics and co-creation:** Addressing power imbalances between young people and stakeholders is essential for effective collaboration and solution-building, particularly in engagements with governmental entities.
- **Mental health support:** Acknowledging the pervasive impact of mental health on youth across various challenges is vital. Combatting issues such as burnout and low self-belief enables youths to overcome barriers to growth and thrive in their endeavours.
- **Geographical and regional equity:** Ensuring that geography does not serve as a barrier to access resources for social and economic development. Providing information and resources to youth in rural areas empowers them to lead and navigate their lives positively, fostering inclusivity and opportunity for all.

Education

Young people in Bangladesh value education but stress the need for substantial improvements, especially in teaching quality in secondary schooling and fostering innovation. A shift towards prioritisation and value of technical education over higher education for career pursuits highlights the gap between schooling and modern skill demands. Class disparities exist, with lower social class individuals facing barriers to higher education. Systemic challenges like inequality and resource limitations hinder adaptability to evolving labour market needs. To support young people, changes are needed in the following areas:

- **Tackle systemic inequalities in access:** Map discrepancies across divisions and urban/rural areas concerning education access and other critical metrics. Specific focus should be placed on education access in Rangpur, who reported the lowest levels of academic achievement across divisions. Prioritise investment and assistance in areas with low educational attainment and access, designing thorough implementation plans.
- **Empower schoolteachers through continuous professional development:** Develop comprehensive teacher training programmes focused on modern teaching methodologies, essential soft skills integration, such as presentation, critical thinking, negotiation skills, and subject-specific knowledge. This is particularly necessary in Chattogram and Dhaka where concerns on the quality of teaching are highest. The Government of Bangladesh is currently implementing teacher training for the 'New School Curriculum 2021', which focuses on competency-based curriculum, experiential and collaborative learning, and an exam-free assessment system. This has been implemented in classes one, six and seven in 2023 with plans to incorporate all classes up to ten by 2025. This shift from rote learning is welcomed by young people. However, efforts to further enhance creativity and continuous development of teaching training, outside of the new curriculum would be welcomed. Workshops, seminars, and ongoing professional development opportunities can equip teachers with modern teaching methodologies and innovative pedagogical techniques. This can be done through collaboration between the Ministry of Education, Education NGOs, youth-led organisations and investment from the private sector into curriculum development.
- **Expand access to technical education:** The Government of Bangladesh has made positive strides towards expanding access to technical and vocational education programmes, most recently through the National Technical and Vocational Qualification Framework (NTVQF). Young people are increasingly seeing technical education as the need of the hour, but increased access is needed down to the village level, as less than one per cent of the population reported TVET in the 2022 census. Young people in Dhaka, Khulna, Rangpur, Sylhet, and Barisal particularly value the need for TVET. The Ministry of Education, Ministry of Labour and Employment should establish partnerships with industry leaders, both public and private sector, vocational training institutes, development sector actors, including bilateral and multi-lateral donors, INGOs, NGOs and local businesses to design and deliver relevant technical education programmes. This industry – academia collaboration should encourage students to participate in internship and apprenticeship programmes to learn computer technology and other hard skills, creating a stronger relationship between industries, institutions and students. Early exposure to the workplace changes the mindset of students and parents, emphasising that skills rather than a particular educational stream provide degrees or certificates, enabling one to perform well in a job.
- **Empower youth creativity:** Fostering innovation and creativity in secondary education emerged as a key issue for young people in the research to support the holistic development of well-rounded citizens. In collaboration, CSOs, youth-led organisations, the Ministry of Youth and Sports and Ministry of Education should work to enhance cocurricular activities, like debating, sports, culture, performing arts, creative industries, arts, and literature alongside academic classes. These activities unlock youth potential, nurture creativity, and offer diverse career paths.

Employment

Youth in Bangladesh face pressing employment issues, including low wages and gender disparities. Rural young women, especially mothers, encounter unique barriers like social stigma and limited support policies. To address these challenges, societal attitudes towards young mothers must shift, and gender responsive policies implemented. Favouritism and nepotism hinder progress, especially for those from lower socio-economic backgrounds. The dominance of informal, low-wage jobs complicates the search for formal employment. This gap prompts youth to consider international migration for better opportunities. However, sectors like Online Freelancing offer potential, particularly for female participation, despite male domination. Lack of knowledge hampers widespread uptake. To tackle these issues, we recommend the following actions:

- **Strengthen private sector partnerships with educational institutions:** Private sector involvement is crucial for fostering partnerships between educational institutions and industry. The industrial zones of Chattogram and Gazipur showcase a symbolic relationship between academia and industry. Internships and on-the-job training have become integral components of the graduates' employability. Government and private sector stakeholders should collaborate to establish long-term internship programmes, from six months and upwards, addressing concerns about short-term internships' perceived lack of benefits for both parties. This should focus on young people aged 18-24, who cite lack of previous experience as a key barrier to employment.
- **Ensure equitable and inclusive Freelancing opportunities:** A lack of relevant digital skills and knowledge of market entry, English language, and business communications skills inhibits participation in Freelancing, particularly for young women. Training programmes that focus on specific skills for Freelancing, such as content writing, data entry, website design, can empower women in this sector. Existing initiatives, such as Coders Trust Bangladesh (CTBD) 'Women's Skills Development for Freelancing Marketplaces (WSDFM)', which trains underprivileged women aged 18–35 with a minimum qualification of Secondary School Certificate (SSC) in freelancing skills can be expanded and replicated.
- **Promote gender-responsive employment policies:** Implement cross-collaborative gender-responsive policies that address the specific barriers faced by young women in the workforce, including social stigma and family responsibilities. Conducting a gender analysis and impact assessments to ensure that policies are effectively addressing the specific needs and priorities of young women in the workforce can enable this. This should be implemented and developed by partnerships between the Ministry of Women and Children Affairs, CSOs, NGOs and the public and private sector industry. Some gender-responsive policies could include:
 - **Encouraging flexible working:** Encouraging employers to adopt flexible working arrangements, such as telecommuting, part-time work, and job-sharing, to accommodate the diverse needs of young women, including those with caregiving responsibilities. Providing incentives for companies that prioritise work-life balance and gender diversity in their employment practices.
 - **Piloting low-cost childcare models:** in Bangladesh, defined by strong conservative gender role divisions, providing low-cost, reliable, community based childcare solution can be a significant enabler of women's outside economic participation. The Government of Bangladesh recognises this, enacting the 2021 Child Daycare Centre Bill that seeks to comprehensively regulate the sector and increase access. However, further support is necessary for implementation.⁹⁵ Conducting a comprehensive community needs assessment to understand the specific childcare requirements of different communities across Bangladesh would be crucial. This assessment should consider factors such as working hours, household dynamics, and existing childcare options. Collaborating with existing providers and community groups can extend programme reach and improve effectiveness, including for example the Department for Women's Affairs.

⁹⁴ Rahman, F., Kamra, A. (2022). 'Why is quality and affordable childcare vital for inclusive growth in Bangladesh', *World Bank*, <https://blogs.worldbank.org/en/endpovertyinsouthasia/why-quality-and-affordable-childcare-vital-inclusive-growth-bangladesh>

Skills development

Despite the prevalence of informal labour, globalisation and digitisation are reshaping Bangladesh's business landscape, driving integration into the global market. Employers increasingly seek graduates with strong communication, leadership, critical thinking and problem solving, presentation, cultural, and digital skills. However, despite a surplus of young workers, there's a shortage of high-skilled individuals, leading employers to look abroad for talent. As Bangladesh's economy becomes more globalised, effective cross-cultural communication is crucial. Yet only a small percentage of young people report fluency in English, despite an overwhelming majority (79 per cent) acknowledging its importance to learn. To address these challenges, we propose the following recommendations:

- **Integrate English language courses with an employability focus:** Given the low levels of fluency in English, and increasing opportunity to work globally online, integrating employability skills into English language courses currently being offered by various organisations, including the British Council, can better prepare students for the job market. This could include modules on resume writing, interview skills, and workplace communication, ensuring that students are equipped with the language skills they need to succeed in their careers.
- **Offer flexible non-formal education options:** Non-formal education providers, including the Bureau of Non-formal education and British council should include flexible learning options, such as evening classes, weekend workshops, and online courses, to accommodate the diverse needs of young people, particularly young mothers. This ensures that individuals can access skill development opportunities without disrupting their other commitments.
- **Promote virtual exchange programmes:** These programmes can leverage technology to connect young people across geographic and cultural boundaries. For example, this can be done by integrating virtual joint projects between universities internationally, for relevant subjects like international relations, economics, and geopolitics. Through online platforms, participants can engage in collaborative projects, discussions and cultural activities with peers from around the world.
- **Invest in practical training for in-demand skills programmes, particularly tech skills:** To address the mismatch between the existing and necessary skills of young people, investment in targeted skills development programmes is essential. Partnering with industries that are experiencing growth, such as IT, Automation/IoT, AI, e-commerce, and renewable energy, can focus on specific digital skills needed in these sectors, with input from industry experts. This includes scaling up existing initiatives, including the Department of Youth Development's short and long courses to create employment opportunities. These efforts should take holistic and sustainable approaches to creating skills and employment opportunities for underprivileged youth in Bangladesh.

Entrepreneurship

Entrepreneurship in Bangladesh holds great potential for youth empowerment and economic growth, yet barriers such as societal norms, limited access to finance, dominance of corporations, and skills gaps persist, particularly for women and those from lower social classes. To address these challenges, it's essential to adopt youth-centric, gender-sensitive strategies. This includes revising policies to support small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), promoting digital literacy, and facilitating access to finance and mentorship. Collaboration among government, private sector, and civil society is vital to create an enabling environment for aspiring entrepreneurs. Therefore, we propose the following recommendations:

- Enhance support for access-to-finance initiatives for entrepreneurship:** Development schemes should meticulously devise strategies to aid young people in securing the necessary funds. This necessitates thorough examination of various financial models and the creation of products tailored to the specific requirements of participating youth, particularly young women. This could involve setting up dedicated funds or grant programmes tailored to the needs of young women. There are many existing government initiatives for funding small and medium enterprises, including the Innovation Fund of Access to Information Programme, the Prime Minister's Office, the ICT Division, the Bangladesh Bank Equity and Entrepreneurship Fund. However, many young people either cannot or do not access this due to a lack of skills and experience. The private sector and private banks should work with the government to design financial literacy courses and to provide customised financial products to offer necessary guidance and investment for young entrepreneurs.
- Mobilise family and community support for youth entrepreneurship:** Family support in starting and running a business is integral to entrepreneurial progress, particularly for rural youth and young women. Implement strategies to cultivate support networks that encourage and empower young entrepreneurs, particularly in rural areas. This could involve organising community awareness programmes, hosting workshops on the benefits of youth entrepreneurship, and facilitating dialogue sessions to address concerns and garner backing from families. Additionally, initiatives to showcase successful youth-led ventures and provide mentorship opportunities within communities can inspire confidence and foster a supportive ecosystem for aspiring entrepreneurs.
- Promote gender equality in entrepreneurship:** Implement targeted support programmes for female entrepreneurs, including mentorship initiatives, funding opportunities, and capacity-building workshops. These programmes should be designed to address the practical challenges reported by women in entrepreneurship, such as access to finance and resources and lack of digital marketing skills.
- Address socioeconomic barriers:** Develop programmes and interventions that address socioeconomic barriers to entrepreneurship, particularly for individuals from lower social classes. Provide financial support, business training, and mentorship programmes tailored to the needs of aspiring entrepreneurs from disadvantaged backgrounds.
- Foster digital literacy and access:** The Ministry for ICT Division should expand youth entrepreneurship through the digital economy and access to markets as part of Startup Bangladesh. This includes investing in digital literacy programmes and infrastructure development to equip young entrepreneurs with the skills and resources necessary to thrive in the online space. Facilitating access to digital platforms and e-commerce channels to enable youth to reach wider audiences and overcome barriers to entry in traditional markets. Providing subsidies or incentives for digital tools and technology adoption among aspiring entrepreneurs can reduce barriers to entry in the digital economy.
- Support Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (SMEs):** The Ministry of Industries, and organisations such as the SME Foundation, in collaboration with various non-government and private entities, including the Bangladesh Small and Cottage Industries Corporation and Micro Industries Development Assistance and Services, should update policies that support the growth and sustainability of SMEs, including tax incentives, regulatory reforms, and access to finance to make them easier for youth and women entrepreneurs. Other stakeholders involved in the implementation of the SME Policy 2019 to create a vibrant SME sector should also support these efforts. Fostering an enabling environment for entrepreneurship by reducing bureaucratic hurdles and streamlining processes for business registration and licensing is crucial.

NEET Youth

The NEET (Not in Education, Employment, or Training) youth issue in Bangladesh is concerning, standing at 41 per cent of the youth population, and predominately made up of women. Challenges include gender expectations on young women, with early marriage and household responsibilities precluding them from the market, societal pressure on young men to excel which can lead to a loss of confidence, economic instability, and a lack of access to relevant opportunities. Recommendations highlighted above for skills development, education and employment will be crucial to supporting NEET, particularly upskilling in the tech space. However, to address the structural factors facing NEET youth people, mental health support, systemic wellbeing, and gender-sensitive programmes are crucial.

As such, we recommend any NEET youth support packages to include:

- **Integrating mental health support and systemic well-being:** The Ministry of Youth and Sports, in collaboration with NGOs, CSOs, international donor agencies and healthcare providers should introduce accessible mental health services and resources to address the intersectionality of NEET status with mental health challenges, homelessness, and financial instability. Various strategies can be implemented. Community-based mental health programmes can offer tailored counselling and support sessions in accessible locations. Integrated service centres can provide a range of support services, including mental health counselling, vocational training, and housing assistance. Peer support networks and mentorship programmes can connect NEET youth with peers for mutual encouragement and guidance. Financial assistance programmes, such as subsidies for mental health treatment and emergency funds, can alleviate financial stress. Additionally, specialised training for mental health professionals and public awareness campaigns can promote understanding and destigmatisation of mental health issues within NEET communities.
- **Gender and disability sensitive modules:** All stakeholders supporting NEET youth should include gender and disability-sensitive modules to ensure inclusivity and support for marginalised groups within the NEET youth population. Gender-sensitive modules for young women can include training in male-dominated fields, such as STEM and trading, and confidence-building and negotiation workshops. Recommendations for young men can include courses addressing societal expectations and healthy masculinity, life skills development, including household management for young fathers, and mentorship with positive male role models. To address barriers for young people with disabilities, workshops on advocating for rights in employment and education can be crucial, and on a systems level strengthening legal protections for people with disabilities in education, employment and public life inclusion is necessary.

Digitisation and digital literacy

As the internet and digitisation play increasingly vital roles in education, economy, climate action, and political participation, prioritising digital infrastructure development and literacy is crucial. It is essential that young people from all backgrounds, whether male or female, urban or rural, have internet access and know how to use it safely. Currently, internet usage is concentrated in major urban centres like Dhaka, with rural women having the least access. To that end, we recommend the following:

- **Expand digital infrastructure:** Implement initiatives to expand digital infrastructure in rural areas, particularly in Barisal, Rajshahi and Rangpur, where internet usage is lowest across divisions. This includes subsidising IT services, expanding 4G mobile coverage and public internet facilities, particularly in areas where internet access is limited, to ensure equitable distribution of opportunities. Encourage private sector companies (e.g. Internet Service Providers) to co-invest in expanding digital infrastructure through subsidies and tax incentives.
- **Promote digital literacy:** Implement comprehensive digital literacy programmes into secondary education to equip young people with the skills to navigate the digital landscape effectively. Emphasise critical thinking, information evaluation and online safety, particularly in the context of social media, to empower youth to discern reliable information from misinformation and contribute positively to online discourse.
- **Consider access to internet usage in any digital literacy and ICT programming:** The government's long-term 5-year Plan and Perspective Plan 2021-2041 prioritises integrating Information and Communication Technology (ICT) into the education system to equip youth for the digital era. However, regions like Rangpur, with low internet access and educational attainment, pose a challenge. Any ICT skills integration into curricula must consider and address these disparities in educational access to ensure equitable preparation for all students.
- **Address gender disparities:** Launch targeted programmes to bridge the gender gap in technology access and usage. Focus on increasing technological access among females in rural areas, particularly in Barisal where only 35 per cent of women used the internet in the last three months, ensuring equal opportunities for all young people regardless of gender, income, or geographic location.

Youth voice – Political and civic engagement

Young people feel connected to their communities but lack influential leaders due to a perceived absence and distrust in current leadership. This mistrust extends to politics, leading to disengagement driven by perceptions of corruption and fear of repercussions. Many feel their voices are not heard, highlighting the need for meaningful political engagement avenues. Despite this, youth express a strong desire for change, evidenced by strong intentions to vote. Informal political engagement is common, but fear of reprisals hinders public expression. To promote youth voice, safe spaces both online and offline for political discussion are essential. Reforms like accessible political engagement, education, and prioritising young voices can foster civil engagement. Based on these findings, we recommend the following:

- **Introduce civic education and citizenship awareness:** Integrate civic education into school curricula at the secondary and higher education level to equip young people with the knowledge and skills necessary to play a full part in democratic society as active and informed citizens. This can equip young people with key principles of parliamentary democracy, avenues for engaging in decision making at local and national levels, and skills necessary to participate in local and national affairs (e.g. critical thinking, legal knowledge to initiate change). In line with objectives of the National Youth Action Plan 2017, curriculum can include increasing knowledge of specific legislation and rights, such as the National Integrity Strategy (NIS) and Right to Information Act.
- **Ensuring safety and freedom of speech in online political engagement:** Creating a safe environment for online discourse and respecting diverse opinions can foster meaningful political conversations through both regulation and awareness raising. All stakeholders should collaborate to develop a digital Ethical Code and guidelines that protect the rights of freedom of expression, reduce online harassment and promote constructive internet use. This can act as an extension of the National Youth Action Plan's objective to facilitate constructive social participation and connectivity of youth on different media, including virtual.
- **Enhance credibility of community leadership:** Foster genuine interaction between local leaders and youth by demonstrating sincere interest in youth issues and involving them in relevant community matters. Amplifying successful case studies of effective community leadership, like in Barisal, can contribute to this.

- **Utilise social media for political engagement:** Utilise popular social media platforms used by young people, like Facebook, YouTube, and TikTok, to simplify political information, facilitate discussions, and engage young people on relevant issues. Young people highlighted the effective use of technology online platforms, such as petitions, crowdfunding, and advocacy websites to initiate and support campaigns. Virtual town halls, webinars, and online forums can enable young people to connect with leaders and peers.
- **Design tailored, segmented awareness campaigns:** Youth organisations, NGOs and CSOs, in conjunction with the Government should create tailored strategies to engage the different segments of young people effectively. The priority segment for change is the 'Climate Indifferent' segment, due to the significant level of civic engagement. Efforts should focus on providing tailored education and awareness resources, offering practical solutions, illustrating local impacts, and framing climate action in alignment with values that resonate with this segment (further research should be conducted on this). Mixed-channel campaigns can be considered due to the almost equal use of television (45 per cent) and social media (44 per cent) for information.

Youth voice in climate action

There are diverse attitudes towards climate change and action among young people in Bangladesh. Segmentation analysis reveals distinct segments on a spectrum of 'Optimistic Climate Activists' to 'Climate Indifferent' individuals, highlighting a gap in prioritisation and awareness. Half of respondents (aged 15-24) were unable to explain climate change or global warming in a recent UNICEF report 'Rising to the Challenge Youth Perspectives on Climate Change and Education in Bangladesh'.⁹⁵ Just under three-quarters (73 per cent) of young people in the Next Generation Bangladesh survey pointed to a need on education on the risk of climate change (45 per cent) and ways to act (28 per cent). A further quarter (26 per cent) reported needing training on technical knowledge and skills to enable the use of green technology. Investing in education and training focused on climate change risks and green technology is crucial for empowering youth to combat climate change effectively. Tailored strategies, from empowerment to education campaigns, can foster ownership and collective action for a sustainable future.

- **Invest in climate education and green technology training:** This can be achieved through various means, such as integrating climate change education into school curricula, offering vocational training programmes on green technology, and providing workshops or seminars on digital literacy skills. Collaboration between government agencies, educational institutions, NGOs, youth-led organisations and private sector entities can help ensure the successful implementation of these programmes. This can facilitate reaching a wide audience of young people, particularly in Barisal and Khulna where concerns about climate change are the highest.

⁹⁵ UNICEF. (2021). Rising to the Challenge Youth Perspectives on Climate Change and Education in Bangladesh. www.unicef.org/rosa/reports/rising-challenge-0.

Gender and social inclusion

Despite progress, persistent discriminatory gender attitudes amongst young men and internalised stigma amongst young women impede the societal progress of Bangladesh. Early marriage and GBV remain significant barriers to gender equality, necessitating comprehensive interventions addressing root causes such as socio-economic hardship and cultural norms.

To that end, we recommend the following:

- **Create an enabling environment for young women in the public sphere:** While strides have been made in empowering women, there remains a crucial need for additional efforts to support them in realising their full potential. Policy interventions should prioritise expanding women’s access to skills development and higher education, alleviating their unpaid care burden through affordable childcare and improved infrastructure, and addressing societal norms that hinder their pursuit of formal employment. Additionally, tackling persistent gender gaps in access to finance requires enhancing women’s financial literacy and strengthening their property rights. By involving various stakeholders, including government bodies, financial institutions, NGOs, and community organisations, Bangladesh can foster an environment where women are empowered to actively participate in and contribute to the nation’s progress.
- **Initiate a review of the progress and implementation of the Domestic Violence (Prevention and Protection) Act, 2010 (DVPPA):** Despite the legal framework it provides, reporting rates for domestic violence remain low, and even fewer cases reach resolution under the DVPPA. This review should entail evaluating the effectiveness of the current legal mechanisms, identifying bottlenecks in implementation, and proposing necessary reforms to enhance the law’s efficacy in protecting victims and holding perpetrators accountable. Additionally, it should involve various stakeholders such as law enforcement agencies, legal experts, civil society organisations, and survivors of domestic violence to gather insights and perspectives for informed decision-making. The review should be holistic and consider community outreach programmes, legal aid services, shelters for victims of abuse, and training for law enforcement officials and healthcare providers on identifying and responding to domestic violence as crucial roles in addressing this issue.
- **Clarify the legal protections against child marriage:** The Bangladesh Government has committed to eliminating child marriage by 2041 and enacted the 2017 Child Marriage Restraint Act (CMRA). While this legislation includes harsher penalties and preventative measures, it also contains provisions that could undermine its effectiveness. Specifically, the law allows marriage before the legal age of 18 under vaguely defined “special circumstances” and threatens punishment for false complaints, potentially discouraging reporting. The government should amend the 2017 CMRA to clearly define “the best interest of the minor” and set a minimum age for marriage under special circumstances, as well as revise penalties for false complaints to encourage reporting. Additionally, comprehensive community awareness programs and robust monitoring systems should be implemented to prevent child marriage and support at-risk girls.
- **Promote gender-sensitive education:** Integrate gender-sensitive education curricula into schools and educational institutions to promote gender equality, challenge stereotypes, and empower young people to become advocates for change. Provide training for teachers and educators on how to facilitate discussions on gender equality and respectful relationships, particularly in Mymensingh and Chattogram, where early marriage and GBV are key concerns for young people.

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Annexure

Annex 1: Sample breakdown

Next Generation nationally representative survey

To ensure we spoke with marginalised and hard-to-reach youth segments which, by virtue of their minority status, are not typically easily captured in a nationally representative survey, we introduced boost samples. As such, the main national sample was made up of 2,600 respondents with an additional 400 respondent boost for marginalised groups. These include youth migrants, youth with special needs, homeless and slum dwelling youth, LGBTIQ youth, out-of-school and illiterate/ half-literate youth among others. Within these groups, emphasis was placed on women and girls, especially those NEET (Not in Education, Employment or Training).

Our total representative sample size is 2,600, which provides an accurate national estimate with a Margin of Error of +/- four per cent at 95 per cent Confidence Level and '2' as design effect (considering that 15–34-year-olds making up 35.16 per cent of the total population of 165.4 million).

Regionally, the sample reflects the national breakdown of 18–35-year-olds in the 2022 Preliminary Census data as reflected below in Table 1. The regional distribution of the boost sample is outlined in Table 2.

Table 1. Regional breakdown of Nationally Representative sample.

Regions	Next Gen Total	2022 Census
Barisal	5%	5%
Chittagong	20%	20%
Dhaka	27%	27%
Khulna	11%	10%
Mymensingh	7%	7%
Rajshahi	12%	12%
Rangpur	11%	11%
Sylhet	7%	7%

Table 2. Regional breakdown of boost sample.

Division	Total Sample	Youth Entrepreneur	Youth Migrants	Ethnic Youth	Youth with Special Needs	TIQ Youth	Affected Negatively by Climate Change	Victims of Human Trafficking	Youth Contacted with Communicable Diseases
Barisal	22	4	7		4	2	8		2
Chittagong	80	10	8	25	5	8	6	15	7
Dhaka	107	12	20	5	20	20			25
Khulna	42	5	4		5	4	8	10	4
Mymensingh	30	4		10	5	2	5		4
Rajshahi	49	8	4	5	5	5	8	10	4
Rangpur	43	7		5	5	5	7	10	4
Sylhet	27	4	7		2	2	8		2
Total Boost Sample	400	54	50	50	51	48	50	45	52

Annex 2: Deep Dives

Deep Dive 1: Mental health concerns surrounding the use of social media

Indeed, the evolving landscape of internet usage, particularly the prevalence of social media platforms like Facebook among adolescents, also raises **concerns about its impact on mental health**. The shift towards spending more time online, often at the expense of traditional activities, has led to potential risks such as exposure to adult content, cyberbullying, and comparison-driven behaviour.

“We’ve observed an increase in suicide rates lately. Now children are spending excessive time on their phones, on content detrimental to mental health. They involve themselves in adult issues, which can detrimentally affect their future.” (Female respondent, 25-29, Barisal, employed).

“Children now confine themselves to home, relying heavily on electronic devices. Before, there were more opportunities for outdoor activities like sports, but these are declining.” (Male respondent, 30-35, Barisal, employed community leader).

While internet usage undoubtedly offers numerous benefits, including access to information, social connectivity, and entertainment, the observed trend towards excessive engagement with online platforms warrants careful consideration. As we navigate the complexities of the digital age, it becomes imperative to prioritise mental health awareness and education, fostering a balanced approach to internet usage that promotes well-being and resilience among adolescents. Efforts to promote digital literacy, responsible online behaviour, and the cultivation of healthy coping mechanisms are essential in mitigating the adverse effects of excessive internet usage on mental health.

Deep Dive 2: Drug and alcohol abuse, young people recognise the detrimental effects but underscore that it is driven by systemic factors

Bangladesh’s socioeconomic reality reveals the need for a holistic approach to addressing substance abuse which encompasses economic, mental health and educational interventions. Among the youth, both substances are viewed with equal negativity for their impact on society. This suggests a **broad recognition of their detrimental effects**, but our research also reveals a nuanced understanding of societal perceptions towards drug and alcohol abuse. For example, respondents showed sympathy towards individuals who resort to such coping mechanisms due to feelings of hopelessness.

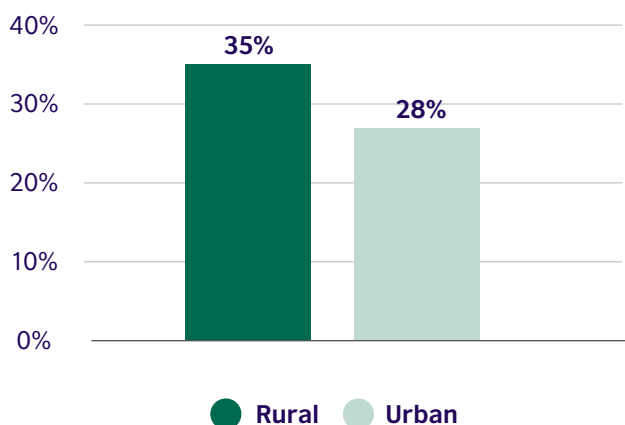
“Poverty is the main reason. Along with that, lack of educational and employment opportunity, bad company, social awareness are some of the major reasons behind this addiction or abuse.” (Male respondent, 18-24, Rajshahi, employed part time, student part time).

There appears to be a **relationship between drug/alcohol abuse and internet usage**, as 28 per cent of internet users reported substance abuse compared to 18 per cent of non-internet users as shown below in Figure 47. Therefore, the influence of the internet and social media on drug and alcohol abuse cannot be overlooked. Previous research has found the link between excessive internet use, detached relationships and deteriorated mental health, elevating the risk of developing addictions.⁹⁷ The visibility and, at times, glorification of substance use online contribute to its normalisation among the youth, complicating efforts to combat its prevalence. This connection points to the need for further research into the relationship between internet usage and drug abuse. Targeted interventions that regard the digital landscape’s role in shaping behaviours and perceptions around substance use need to be considered.

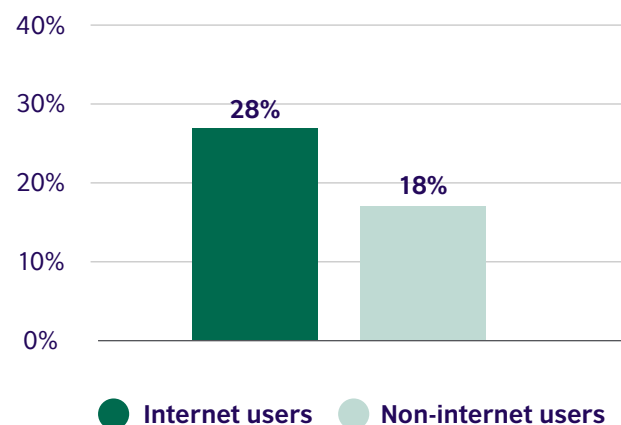
“Youth are heavily influenced and addicted to social media. There’s also a concerning rise in drug addiction. Youth cannot think properly due to their addiction and bad habits.” (Female respondent, 25-29, Dhaka, unemployed but not looking for a job, mother, Bachelor’s).

Figure 47. Drug abuse by urbanity and internet use.

Drug/alcohol abuse in young rural and urban men



Drug/alcohol abuse and internet use



Base: Partial sample: Weighted base, Urban male, n=502, Rural male, n=983, Internet users, n=2012, non-internet users, n=962.

⁹⁷ Sayeed, A., Islam, M.S., Christopher, E. et al. (2023). Investigating problematic uses of Facebook and other Internet activities among university students in Bangladesh during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Sci Rep* 13, 1307. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41598-023-27394-w>

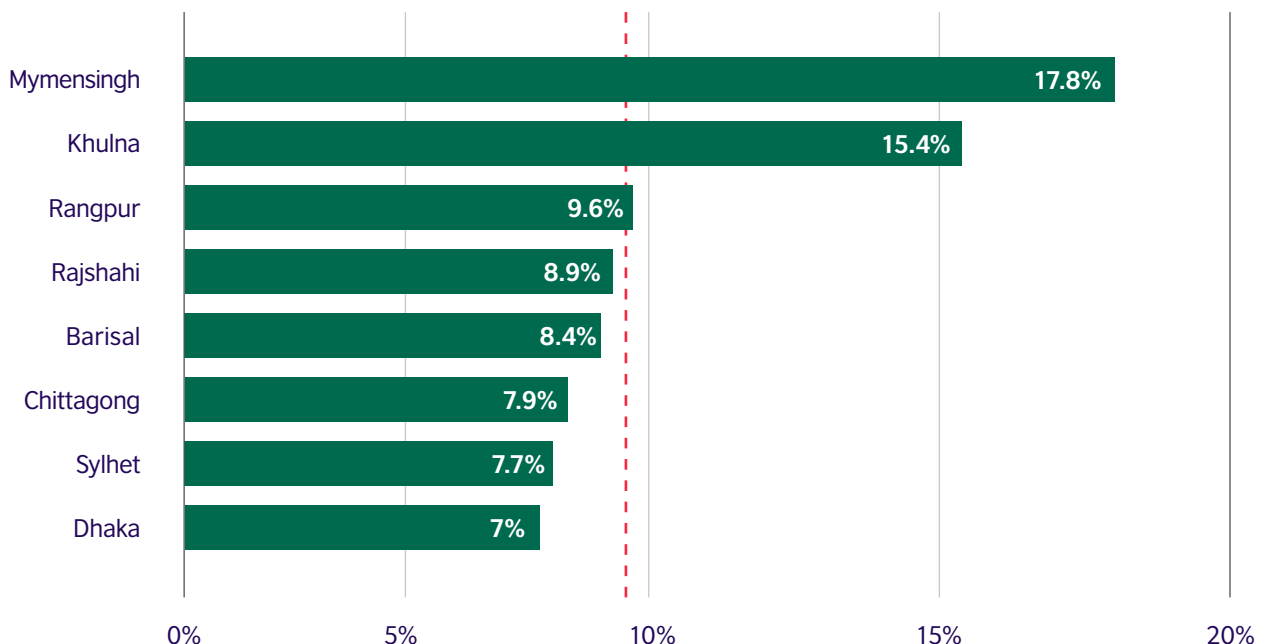
Deep Dive 3: Early marriage, increased awareness but the practice persists

Early marriage and discriminatory norms present significant barriers to gender equality and women's empowerment in Bangladesh. According to UNICEF (2020), **51 per cent of Bangladeshi women aged 20-24 were married before their 18th birthday**, with 16 per cent married before their 15th birthday.⁹⁸ **Prevalence and concern of early marriage appears to vary by Division, where only ten per cent of the full sample reported early marriage as the most pressing issue in their local community, with Mymensingh reporting the highest concern** (see Figure 48).

In recent years, Bangladesh has seen a surge in efforts to combat the pervasive issue of child marriage, particularly from grassroots organisations and NGOs.⁹⁹ This shift is marked by a considerable increase in awareness-raising initiatives, including meetings, trainings, and advocacy campaigns aimed at educating communities about the harmful consequences of early marriage.

“There have been significant changes. For instance, we now have meetings and training to raise awareness about child marriage. Seeing these efforts, people become more interested in learning about such issues. Overall, there are many more meetings, discussions, and even courtyard meetings happening compared to before. Before they didn't have people going door-to-door advocating against certain practices.” (Young woman who was a victim of early marriage, 25-29, Mymensingh).

Figure 48. Percentage of young people in Division who report early marriage the most pressing issue in community today.



Base: Weighted. Total sample, n=3000.

⁹⁸ United Nations Children's Fund. (2020). *A profile of progress in Bangladesh*.

⁹⁹ Féministes En Action. (2023, May 12). Bangladesh: fighting against early child marriage. Féministes En Action ! <https://feminaction.fr/en/early-marriage-bangladesh>

This increase in awareness is juxtaposed with the stark realities faced by many individuals, exemplified by personal accounts echoing a prevalent trend. Many young women reflected on their own experiences, recounting narratives shaped by socio-economic hardship and cultural norms that perpetuate early marriage practices. **Financial instability within families, coupled with societal expectations, often compel parents to marry off their daughters** as soon as they reach puberty, depriving them of educational opportunities and subjecting them to marital obligations at a young age.

“My family was facing financial difficulties at the time. My father wasn’t there, and my mother was struggling to manage the household. In our village, it’s common to marry off daughters as soon as they reach puberty. Once I was married, I wasn’t allowed to use the phone, I had to obey their every command and I didn’t have any opportunities to study or work. I felt mentally and physically drained during that time.” (Young woman who was a victim of early marriage, 25-29, Mymensingh).

The consequences of child marriage extend beyond the individual, reverberating through families and communities. **Disrupted education pathways, strained familial relationships, and exacerbated financial burdens emerge as recurring themes** in these narratives. Families grappling with limited income find themselves further stretched by the rising cost of living, exacerbating tensions within households and compounding existing challenges.

Regional disparities in socio-economic status and cultural norms significantly influence the prevalence of child marriage. For instance, respondents from urban areas like Dhaka highlight contrasting realities, where societal pressures and expectations persist despite advancements in awareness.

“Experiences also vary based on economic background, social status, and geographical location. For instance, the lifestyle in Dhaka South differs significantly from that in Dhaka North. Personally, where I grew up, being female felt like a curse. Most girls are married off between the ages of 15 to 18, and parents start to worry if their daughter isn’t married by 18, even in big cities like Dhaka”. (Female respondent, 25-29, Dhaka, employed, Bachelor’s).

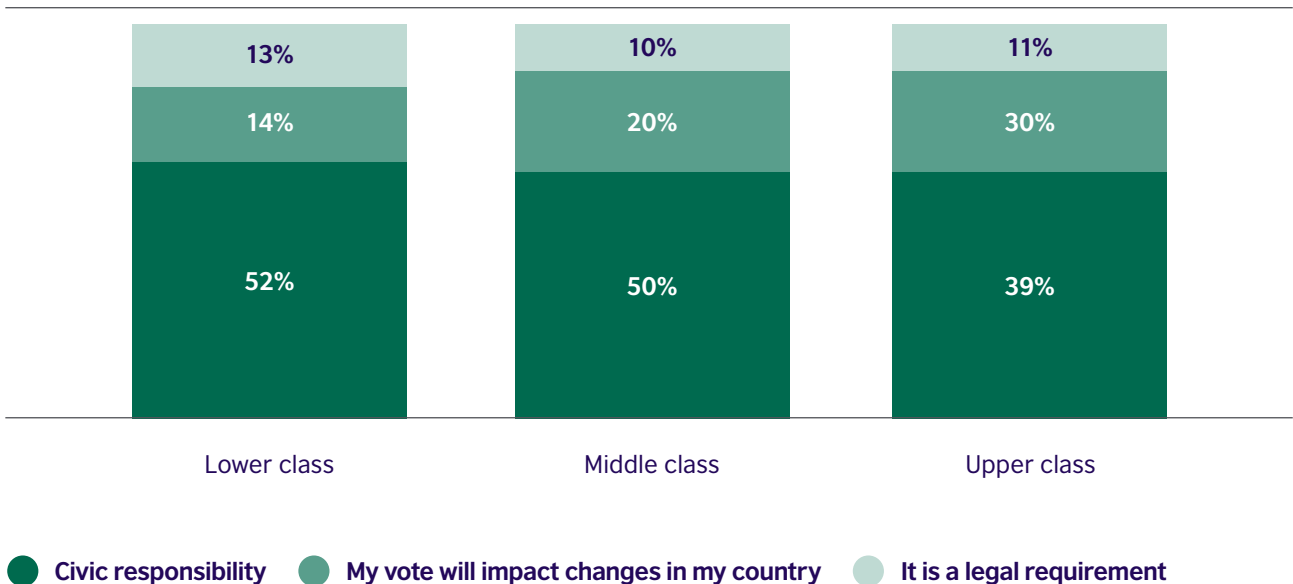
This trend highlights the urgent need for **comprehensive interventions to address the root causes of child marriage in Bangladesh.** While increased awareness efforts represent a significant step forward, sustained action is required to dismantle entrenched socio-economic barriers and challenge cultural norms that perpetuate early marriage practices. By fostering community dialogue, enhancing access to education and economic opportunities, and advocating for policy reforms, stakeholders can work towards creating a future where every child has the opportunity to thrive free from the constraints of early marriage.

Deep Dive 4: Improving the education system, policing and the economy are key voting issues for young people

The top three most significant issues influencing young people’s vote is improving education (85 per cent), improving the justice/police system (85 per cent), and improving the economy (81 per cent).¹⁰⁰ When voting for a candidate, the emphasis on honesty and integrity in candidates is notable, indicating a strong desire for transparency and accountability in political leadership. This aligns with the perception of corruption as a significant driver of distrust in the political system among young people. One of the most important qualities respondents look for is that they are ‘honest and free from corruption’ (43 per cent), followed by understanding the problems facing people in Bangladesh (ten per cent), and bringing new ideas and not be associated with past failures (nine per cent).

Additionally, the motivations behind young people’s intention to vote highlight a sense of civic duty and responsibility (51 per cent), with many believing that their vote can effect meaningful change in Bangladesh (15 per cent). This underscores a commitment to democratic principles and active participation in the political process. Young people in the upper social class are twice as likely to believe that their vote will impact changes compared to the lower class (Figure 49). This disparity in perceptions regarding the impact of voting between social classes suggests potential differences in political efficacy and confidence in the electoral system.

Figure 49. Top three reasons for voting by income level.



Base: Weighted. Total sample, n=3000.

¹⁰⁰ It is important to note that improving the economy, emergency response in case of disasters, employment, international alliances, and ending corruption are equally regarded by 81% as important/very important to voting intention.

Deep Dive 5: Segments for climate action

Table 3. Climate segmentation by variables.

Variables	The ‘Optimistic Climate Activists’	The ‘Climate Advocates’	The ‘Climate Anxious Pessimists’	The ‘Climate Indifferent’
Climate Concern	Very concerned	Concerned	Somewhat concerned	Neutral
Climate Action	Very active, Physical	Active, raising awareness	Physical and Awareness	Awareness, not physical
Political Engagement	Somewhat	Engaged	Unengaged	Neutral
Political Action	Informal	Formal	Formal	Informal
Future Outlook	Very optimistic	Optimistic	Very pessimistic	Pessimistic
Media channels	Social media	Social media	Traditional media (Newspapers and Television)	Television and social media

The ‘Optimistic Climate Activists’ (15 per cent)

Reaching the ‘Optimistic Climate Activists’ segment involves tapping into their high level of concern about climate change while acknowledging their optimism about the potential for positive change through action.

This segment is the most likely to turn to social media for information (46 per cent), suggesting the potential for digital strategies. Further tailored strategies to engage this segment effectively could include:

- 1. Empowerment through action:** Highlight the tangible impact of individual and collective climate actions. Provide opportunities for them to actively participate in climate-related activities such as campaigns, activism, conservation efforts, and community clean-up initiatives. Emphasise how their efforts contribute to meaningful change and inspire others to join the cause.
- 2. Community engagement:** Foster a sense of community among “Optimistic Climate Activists” by creating spaces for discussion, collaboration, and knowledge-sharing. Facilitate informal gatherings, workshops, and online forums where they can exchange ideas, share experiences, and mobilise support for climate action initiatives. Encourage them to leverage their social networks to amplify their message and influence others.
- 3. Tailored communication:** Develop messaging that resonates with their optimistic outlook and belief in the potential for positive change. Highlight success stories, progress, and solutions in addressing climate challenges. Frame climate action as an opportunity for innovation, resilience-building, and creating a better future for generations to come.
- 4. Policy engagement:** While ‘Optimistic Climate Activists’ may be less engaged with formal politics, provide opportunities for them to advocate for policy changes and systemic solutions to address climate change. Offer resources and guidance on how to effectively communicate with policymakers, participate in public consultations, and support climate-friendly legislation.
- 5. Education and awareness:** Equip ‘Optimistic Climate Activists’ with accurate information, scientific knowledge, and resources to deepen their understanding of climate issues and solutions. Empower them to become ambassadors for climate literacy within their communities by sharing evidence-based information and debunking misinformation.

The ‘Climate Advocates’ (40 per cent)

Reaching the largest segment of youth, the “Climate Advocates” involves recognising their high level of concern about climate change and their active engagement in formal political activities. Like the ‘Optimistic Climate Activists’, community engagement and building will be key and social media is the most significant avenue to engage this group, used by 45 per cent of the segment to receive news.

Some further strategies to effectively engage this segment are as follows:

- 1. Policy advocacy:** Capitalise on the ‘Climate Advocates’ engagement in formal political activities by providing opportunities for them to advocate for climate-friendly policies and initiatives. Offer resources, training, and guidance on how to effectively communicate with policymakers, lobby for climate action, and support legislation that addresses climate change.
- 2. Campaign participation:** Encourage ‘Climate Advocates’ to actively participate in climate-related campaigns, initiatives, and advocacy efforts. Provide platforms for them to lend their voices, share their stories, and mobilise support for climate action at local, national, and global levels. Collaborate with existing organisations and networks to amplify their impact and reach a wider audience.
- 3. Education and awareness:** Empower ‘Climate Advocates’ with accurate information, scientific knowledge, and resources to deepen their understanding of climate issues and solutions. Organise workshops, webinars, and educational events focused on key climate topics, policy developments, and grassroots activism. Foster dialogue, critical thinking, and collaboration among ‘Climate Advocates’ to strengthen their awareness raising efforts.
- 4. Messaging and framing:** Tailor communication and messaging to resonate with the values, concerns, and motivations of ‘Climate Advocates.’ Highlight the urgency of climate change, the importance of collective action, and the potential for positive outcomes through policy interventions and community engagement. Frame climate action as a moral imperative, a shared responsibility, and an opportunity for creating a more sustainable and resilient future for all.

The ‘Climate Indifferent’ (39 per cent)

Finally, engaging the ‘Climate Indifferent’ is crucial, given the segment proportion. While they may not actively engage in climate action or express strong concern, their participation in democratic processes indicates a baseline level of civic engagement. This segment almost equally uses both television (45 per cent) and social media (44 per cent) for information, pointing to mixed-modal approaches. Efforts to engage this segment may involve highlighting the relevance of climate issues to their daily lives and emphasising the potential for positive change through collective action:

- 1. Education and awareness:** Provide accessible and informative resources about climate change tailored to the specific concerns and interests of the ‘Climate Indifferent’ segment. Highlight the relevance of climate issues to their daily lives, emphasising the potential impacts on health, economy, and community well-being.
- 2. Pragmatic solutions:** Offer practical and achievable actions that individuals can take to contribute to climate mitigation and adaptation efforts, even if they are not deeply concerned about the issue. Highlight simple lifestyle changes, energy-saving tips, and community-based projects that have a measurable impact on reducing carbon emissions and building resilience to climate impacts.
- 3. Localised impact:** Illustrate the local and immediate impacts of climate change to make the issue more tangible and relevant to the ‘Climate Indifferent’ segment. Showcase local initiatives, success stories, and community-led solutions that demonstrate the potential for positive change and empower individuals to take action in their own communities.
- 4. Value-based messaging:** Frame climate action in alignment with values that resonate with the ‘Climate Indifferent’ segment, such as stewardship of natural resources, economic prosperity, or social justice. Further research would be needed to better understand what these values may be. Emphasise the importance of environmental sustainability as a shared responsibility and highlight the benefits of taking proactive steps to address climate change.

Deep Dive 6: Digitisation to equalise gendered barriers in entrepreneurship

Digital entrepreneurship presents a significant opportunity for young women to overcome limited access to capital and societal norms. As explored above, women entrepreneurs encounter various challenges including limited access to capital, lack of training opportunities, gender discrimination, and societal norms that favour men in business.

“To start a new business or expand an existing business, they need huge amounts of capital, and there are very few loans and investment facilities for women... Another major challenge women entrepreneurs are facing here is the lack of training and development opportunities.” (Female respondent, 25-29, Rangpur, entrepreneur).

Microcredit initiatives have sought to address some of these challenges by providing women microentrepreneurs with access to finance for their businesses. However, access to both financial and non-financial resources remain limited due to social norms and gender discrimination. As such, **social media platforms offer significant opportunities for women entrepreneurs to establish online businesses with minimal investment.** They serve as marketplaces for selling products, creating employment opportunities, and overcoming traditional barriers to women’s economic participation.

“Many women are standing on their own feet through Facebook, Instagram... This online business is becoming popular day by day as the phone is in hand and the products of choice are available within a few days.” (Female respondent, 25-29, Dhaka, unemployed but not looking for job, Bachelor’s).

However, the emergence of digital entrepreneurship presents both opportunities and challenges for women entrepreneurs. **While digital platforms offer a low-cost entry into business, the lack of digital marketing knowledge and social media operations skills poses obstacles to sustaining online businesses.** Many women entrepreneurs struggle to establish trust and credibility on social media platforms due to limited capital and digital skills. Additionally, unethical practices by some online businesses undermine trust in online-based ventures, further complicating the situation for women entrepreneurs.

“Women entrepreneurs who are trying to start a business with a small amount of capital and a lack of digital skills are facing a lot of obstacles in building trust on social media sites.” (Female respondent, 25-29, Chattogram, employed full time, Master’s).

Deep Dive 7: Green technology: Tech enabled solutions to promote climate action

From the Next Generation Bangladesh survey, the most support that respondents identified was needed is education on the risks of climate change, and training on the use of green technology. **Green technology is recognised as a crucial tool for combating climate change in both the survey and the qualitative findings. However, its successful implementation requires not only access to technology but also the proper knowledge and skills.**

“Without the knowledge of climate adaption, green technology, and the practical knowledge of using digital devices our young generation can’t take action on climate change.” (Male respondent, 18-24, Rangpur, student).

Investing in education and training programmes focused on climate adaptation, green technology, and digital literacy is essential for empowering the younger generation to address climate change effectively. In addition, young people underscored the role of technology and digital marketplaces in mitigating the potential economic impacts of climate change on agriculture and production. With the anticipated decrease in arable land due to environmental shifts, there arises a need to explore alternative avenues for economic sustainability. Young people suggested leveraging digital market spaces to export expertise and innovative solutions, thereby addressing future challenges and bolstering economic resilience.

“In the future, we will have fewer green lands in our country which may cause less opportunity in agriculture. We will have to import more food items from other countries to fulfil the needs of our population. So, we have to figure out a way to export our expertise or what we can develop for the future...we can do this through the digital market space.” (Female respondent, 25-29, Dhaka, employed, Bachelor’s).



Green technology is recognised as a crucial tool for combating climate change in both the survey and the qualitative findings. However, its successful implementation requires not only access to technology but also the proper knowledge and skills.

Annex 3: Case Studies

Case Study 1

Violence against women, Chittagong

Overview

Violence against women stands out as one of the most pressing issues among the youth in Chittagong. While acknowledging improvements compared to the experience of previous generations due to rising education levels in their generation and legal reforms, young people emphasise certain factors they feel are making the matter worse. The impact on physical and mental health especially of domestic violence is widely recognised and underscores the need for further government intervention. This case study explores the perspectives on the challenges, opportunities and solutions shared by the youth in Chittagong surrounding this critical issue.

Challenges

Youth perspectives on violence against women highlight its primary occurrence within the confines of the home, often between husbands and wives. Many attribute this problem to childhood experiences, where children witness male figures mistreating women, perpetuating a cycle of abuse. This behaviour is often reinforced by the outdated patriarchal belief in female inferiority held by some members of society.

Financial strain within households is believed to further exacerbates the issue. The inability to fulfil dowry obligations or resorting to gambling to alleviate financial burdens often leads to increased abuse directed towards women. Consequently, women bear the brunt of the consequences, facing blame and mistreatment from male family members who channel their frustrations and losses towards them.



Children witness adults, particularly fathers, mistreating women in their families. For instance, a boy may see his father beating his mother, and he learns from this behaviour. Growing up in such an environment, he may start exhibiting similar behaviour.

- Triad Interview, mix of victims of violence against women



Image: Community case study participant, Chittagong, 2023.

Opportunities

While acknowledging the significant challenges, the youth in Chittagong are actively identifying and embracing opportunities to address this issue. Foremost among these is the role of education, seen as a powerful tool to break the cycle of violence against women and a key factor in the observed improvements compared to previous generations.

Additionally, technology and television are recognised as influential platforms for raising awareness within the community and among society at large.



There were fewer educated people too. Parents were not as aware. Now, everyone studies, everyone knows.

- Female respondent, 25-29, Full-time employed, not-politically engaged



Image: Innovative Research and Consultancy, Chittagong, 2023

Solutions

Support for victims: This is seen as essential by respondents who emphasised the need for both legal and physical assistance. They suggested providing shelters and legal aid to victims when they seek help. Enforcing legal consequences for perpetrators and ensuring the protection of victims were highlighted as crucial deterrents against future violence.

Alternative family dispute resolution methods: Providing alternative routes for family issues was also proposed, including mediation facilitated by local community leaders or commissioners. This approach offers an alternative avenue for resolving family conflicts and provides guidance to those involved.

Advocacy and raising awareness: Both were identified as key strategies for addressing the issue. Respondents emphasised the importance of discussing the issue openly and leveraging popular social media platforms to spread awareness. They highlighted the role of educated youth in driving this advocacy forward and emphasised the need for governmental action to challenge patriarchal, superstitious, and sometimes religious beliefs that perpetuate barriers to resolving this issue.



Numerous individuals now recognise themselves as victims of these issues. They learn about them through TV and social media.”

- Female respondent, 25-29, Influencer

Case Study 2

Early marriage, Mymensingh

Overview

Early marriage is a sensitive yet pivotal issue specifically affecting girls in Mymensingh. Often decided by family members, these unions are influenced by various factors including well-intentioned motives, financial pressures, and societal norms. However, the youth of Mymensingh recognise the detrimental effects of early marriage on the well-being of young girls. They emphasise the necessity for government intervention and community-wide dialogue to dispel misconceptions, address misunderstandings, and increase understanding of the ramifications of this crucial decision.

Challenges

Misconceptions about marriage among family members and parents represent a significant challenge. It is often believed that marrying their child earlier will afford them a better life and alleviate the impact of poverty faced within their families.

However, this notion is frequently unfounded as early marriage can lead to increased vulnerability to abuse and restrict opportunities for further education and employment for girls. Respondents also noted that because of this, economically disadvantaged families are more susceptible to this practice.

Similarly, patriarchal beliefs and societal expectations regarding the roles of women present another challenge. Young brides often face unrealistic standards from their in-laws alongside the risks associated with early pregnancies, further exacerbated by these societal pressures.

“

Many parents just marry their daughter early out of poverty. They think their daughter will be happy in husband's house. What her parents couldn't give will be given by the husbands.

- FGD, mixed ages between 20-35



Image: Innovative Research and Consultancy, Mymensingh, 2024.



There have been significant changes. For instance, we now have meetings and training to raise awareness about child marriage. Back then, the environment wasn't like this. They didn't have people going door-to-door advocating against certain practices. In contrast, nowadays, people travel across Bangladesh to raise awareness.

- Female, 27, victim of early marriage

Opportunities

New approaches to advocacy like nationwide awareness campaigns and door-to-door outreach, according to young people's asks, offer fresh opportunities to tackle this issue that could not be utilised before. Other respondents, including those who have experienced early marriage, see the improved access to education for children in Bangladesh as a hopeful sign and opportunity for future generations to address this issue.

Solutions to increase engagement:

Increasing understanding of the negative implications: It's crucial to educate parents fully about the risks and consequences associated with early marriage, ensuring they understand that any perceived benefits are outweighed by the harm it can cause.

Open dialogue and continuous conversations around the issue: While there's some ongoing discussion about this issue, respondents stress the importance of expanding and sustaining these conversations. They recommend leveraging social media and the internet to raise parental awareness, as well as amplifying the voices of educators, activists, and local authorities.

Better opportunities for girls: Providing equal access to education at all levels and fair treatment in employment opportunities is essential. This not only demonstrates the potential of educated girls and women but also empowers them to become self-sufficient in the future.



Image: Innovative Research and Consultancy, Mymensingh, 2024.

Case Study 3

Cost of living, Dhaka

Overview

The high cost of living, especially prevalent in the capital, presents significant challenges for young people in Dhaka. High rents and food prices often strain those who migrated from rural areas in search of better job opportunities, sometimes forcing them to abandon their studies to cover living expenses. This issue has been further compounded by the pandemic, particularly affecting those without alternative streams of financial support, such as from their family. The solutions and opportunities identified by the youth focus on both self-initiated actions to help them combat this challenge and government interventions aimed at supporting young people as a collective.

Challenges

Divergent values between urban and rural areas, coupled with the absence of a support network for migrant youth, exacerbate challenges. In villages, a collective ethos prevails, fostering mutual aid during times of need, while the capital promotes a sense of self-reliance.

Rising living expenses have also compelled some young people to prioritise immediate employment over education. The pressure to provide overrides academic ambitions, leading many to forgo higher studies completely.

Hopelessness and the impact of the inadequacy of salaries relative to living costs on youth mental health is another challenge voiced. Feelings that the issue is out of their control and societal pressure to provide, prompting youth to accumulate debt result in a sense of despair among the youth about their prospects.

69

In rural areas, many are migrating to cities in search of better opportunities, only to find themselves struggling even more due to the high cost of living and inadequate housing.

- Triad Interview, Mix of political engagement



Image: Innovative Research and Consultancy, Dhaka, 2024.

Opportunities

Young people have identified freelancing as a key opportunity to address the impact of this challenge. They recognise the initiative they can take individually to seize this opportunity.

Entrepreneurship is also seen as a pathway for young individuals to create more employment opportunities for their peers and generate income themselves. By starting their own businesses, youth can also gain autonomy and control over their financial futures, empowering them to navigate the challenges posed by high living costs more effectively.

Solutions to increase engagement:

Policymakers wield significant influence in addressing this issue: The most mentioned solution to this issue lies with the government, the youth believe they have the power to create more job opportunities for youth, regulate commodity prices, and invest in domestic production of goods. Additionally, increased government or foreign investment in the IT and technology sector can create more tailored job opportunities for youth and meet their salary needs more effectively.

Temporal relief by local community: Local communities can provide temporary relief by connecting youth with existing schemes or initiatives. These could include access to resources such as meal rations or facilitating discussions between youth and local traders to maintain reasonable prices.



Image: Innovative Research and Consultancy, Dhaka, 2024.

Case Study 4

International migration, Sylhet

Overview

International migration plays a crucial role in Bangladesh's economic landscape, with the country ranking as the seventh highest recipient of remittances worldwide. This topic holds significant relevance in the daily lives of youth, particularly in Sylhet, which has a rich history of connections to other countries and overseas migration. However, perspectives among Sylhet's youth vary regarding the motivations behind seeking opportunities abroad and the realities of living as migrants. Despite these differences, there is consensus among respondents on the need for improved employment conditions in Bangladesh as a solution to address migration challenges, all of which are explored in this case study.

Challenges

According to respondents from Sylhet, there are two main challenges contributing to the migration issue. Firstly, the employment situation for youth in Bangladesh poses significant obstacles. High living costs, low wages, and the prevalence of corruption and nepotism make finding employment domestically difficult, prompting many young people to seek opportunities elsewhere. Thus, it is not entirely seen negatively.

Another challenge revolves around the process and perceptions of moving abroad. Social media posts showcasing foreign lifestyles of friends, family, and peers often attract young people to study abroad, glossing over the difficulties they may face, such as hard labour jobs and loneliness. Additionally, scams and fraudsters exploit those seeking better economic opportunities abroad, leaving them disappointed in the end.

“

Most individuals here aspire to migrate abroad. The allure of a foreign lifestyle, portrayed through social media videos or anecdotes from others, heavily influences their decisions.

- Triad Interview, respondents who wish and don't wish to migrate



Image: Community Case study participants, Sylhet, 2024.

Opportunities

There are also opportunities identified by the youth in Sylhet regarding this topic. The technology sector in Bangladesh provides domestic opportunities for youth to earn a living through their own initiatives, using their smartphones. They believe this is key to accomplishing things at home. Additionally, they see remittances as useful opportunities to invest domestically in Bangladesh and ultimately benefit in the long run.

Solutions:

More domestic workplaces for youth: Respondents strongly believe that increasing job opportunities within the country would discourage talented youth from seeking opportunities elsewhere. They emphasise the importance of creating more workplaces and investing in various sectors not only in Dhaka but also in other parts of the country, such as Sylhet. Additionally, addressing the high living costs was highlighted as a solution by respondents.

Promoting meritocracy when it comes to employment: Reducing corruption and fraudulent practices would ensure that jobs are offered based on qualifications rather than connections. This shift towards merit-based employment according to respondents would diminish the incentive for people to seek opportunities abroad.

“

People here are very hardworking. They manage to do anything. Young people are doing courses from many organisations and earning lots of money doing web design, YouTube management, freelancing, etc.

- Triad Interview, mix of respondents who wish to migrate and those who do not



Image: Community Case study participants, Sylhet, 2024.

Case Study 5

Political engagement, Barisal

Overview

Political engagement in Barisal is complex and influenced by familial legacies, societal norms, and evolving aspirations. Young people in Barisal reported the highest levels of engagement with politics across all divisions but were significantly more likely to highlight lack of political engagement as the most pressing issue in their community. While some individuals perceive politics as a means of empowerment and societal progress, others view it through a lens tainted by corruption and coercion. Against this backdrop, this case study explores the nuances of political involvement in Barisal, shedding light on the challenges, opportunities, and solutions that shape the division's political landscape.



Students from rural areas, influenced by their fathers' affiliations with specific political groups, often adopt the same allegiance when they move to cities for education. However, they rarely question their fathers about the rationale behind supporting a particular group or the merits and drawbacks associated with it.

- Triad Interview

Challenges

In Barisal, familial affiliations often dictate political allegiances, with individuals inheriting their family's perspectives on politics. This perpetuates a cycle where questioning one's political beliefs is discouraged, leading to a lack of critical discourse and meaningful engagement. Moreover, the influence of political groups on rural youth, coupled with a dearth of political education, hampers informed decision-making and perpetuates a culture of allegiance without scrutiny.

Fear of reprisals and lack of transparency pose significant barriers to meaningful political engagement in Barisal. Instances of political conflicts leading to physical assaults and legal disputes highlight the challenges faced by residents. Moreover, the absence of avenues for open discourse and criticism stifles constructive dialogue, contributing to a culture of silence.



Image: Community Case study participants, Barisal, 2024

Opportunities

Despite challenges, there are opportunities for enhancing political engagement in Barisal. The youth demonstrate a growing interest in addressing societal issues and fostering positive change, and are actively engaged in their communities. Their technological prowess and eagerness to contribute offer a ray of hope for revitalising political discourse in the region.

Additionally, initiatives such as college-based political forums foster dialogue and awareness among the younger generation, paving the way for informed political participation.



We see many young people taking up leadership roles in state activities. In the past, this was mostly done by seniors, but the scenario has changed. The Government has created opportunities for young leaders to cater to the demands of society effectively. This decision has proven beneficial.

- Female respondent, 25-29,
Full-time employed, not-politically engaged

Solutions to increase engagement:

Fostering an open environment: Open dialogue and dissent is essential. This involves challenging familial and societal norms that discourage questioning and promoting platforms for constructive discourse.

Investing in political education: Particularly among rural youth, this is paramount. By providing unbiased information on political ideologies, processes, and civic rights, individuals can make informed decisions and engage meaningfully in the political sphere.

Promoting ethical leadership: Emphasising the importance of ethical conduct and integrity among political leaders is crucial for restoring public trust in the political system. Efforts should be made to hold leaders accountable for their actions and ensure transparency in decision-making processes.

Strengthening grassroots activism: Supporting grassroots initiatives and community-led projects can mobilise local residents to address pressing issues and advocate for positive change. By empowering communities to take ownership of their political future, lasting social transformation can be achieved.



Image: Community Case study participants, Barisal, 2024

Case Study 6

Climate change, Khulna

Overview

Climate change and environmental-related shocks are among the most pressing issues of our time, particularly in Bangladesh, where the geographical position exacerbates the impact. For the youth in Khulna residing in the coastal belt of Bangladesh, identified by the Asian Development Bank as one of the most vulnerable areas in the country, addressing this issue is crucial. In their lifetime they have witnessed more frequent environmental shocks including floods, rising temperatures, and natural disasters than their parents. This case study will explore the impact of climate change on their lives, along with the challenges, opportunities, and solutions they perceive.

Challenges

One of the key challenges exacerbating environmental shocks and their impact on the lives of youth in Khulna is the inadequate infrastructure. Houses, schools, roads, and unstable river embankments, ill-equipped and vulnerable to flooding, have suffered damage or destruction. This disproportionately affects those residing in rural communities within the province.

Consequently, education is often disrupted for youth, while livelihoods of young farmers, fishermen, and businessmen are interrupted. Corruption exacerbates this issue, as youth attribute the misallocation of funds for crucial infrastructure and unfulfilled promises by local politicians to the problem. Moreover, youth recognise that individuals with disabilities face even greater challenges in safeguarding themselves during disasters.



Image: Community Case study participants, Khulna, 2024.

Opportunities

Although some see the youth themselves as having the potential to reduce their own environmental footprint, for most youth in these areas, migration, both domestically and internationally, is an opportunity, offering hope for their future. They believe that with the proper safeguards in place for their homes and key community institutions like schools, they wouldn't need to seek opportunities elsewhere. Additionally, youth from Khulna are optimistic about employment opportunities in Bangladesh and view the government's current actions in this realm as a step in the right direction for them.

“

Youths in my area aspire to have a better future. So, many of them have opted to go abroad for that. Those who remain here seek opportunities elsewhere for work and education.

- Male, 22, living in a high-risk flooding area

Solutions:

Government intervention: It is imperative for the government to undertake crucial infrastructure projects to better equip these areas for environmental shocks. This includes the construction of bridges, new roads, and cyclone shelters, as well as implementing tree-planting initiatives. However, achieving this requires measures to limit corruption, which often diverts essential funds from these projects.

Increased local awareness: They propose awareness campaigns led not only by the government but also by local community leaders who hold sway, such as imams, to disseminate knowledge about climate-related issues. These campaigns should educate individuals on the steps they can take to improve their area on an individual level. Youth advocates and activists are also identified as key stakeholders in collaborating with their local community to address these challenges.



Image: Community Case study participants, Khulna, 2024.

Case Study 7

Lack of well-suited employment, Rangpur

Overview

The lack of suitable employment opportunities poses a significant challenge for youth in Rangpur, a region predominantly focused on agriculture. Finding relevant employment after completing higher education is particularly difficult, impacting future family and career prospects and prompting many young people to seek opportunities elsewhere. Many attribute this issue to corrupt practices in job allocations, predominantly affecting lower and middle-class individuals. This case study delves into the perspectives of Rangpur's youth on the challenges, opportunities, and potential solutions to this problem.

Challenges

In Rangpur, securing a job within your field after university solely based on qualifications is uncommon. Many individuals shared that obtaining a well-suited workplace often requires connections, references from those connections, and/or bribes. Consequently, there is an unfair advantage for those with the financial means to secure jobs irrespective of their qualifications.

This situation has led to financial and mental challenges for the youth. On one hand, they face financial difficulties in planning for their future, such as considering marriage or starting a family. On the other hand, they endure pressure from family members grappling with high living costs and sometimes face blame for their employment situation. This demoralises the youth, with some turning to smoking or narcotics for relief.



Without references, many people are not getting jobs despite having the qualifications. No private jobs are found without a medium. Even to drop a CV, a reference is required. This is the system of Bangladesh.

- Triad Interview, working women and NEET youth, 34,23,34



Image: Innovative Research and Consultancy, Rangpur, 2024.



When my parents grew up, they didn't have the same opportunities like us. (...) There are a lot of training centres. We can start a business with small capital. The government is giving that opportunity. Through this training, if we start doing small businesses, we can take Bangladesh ahead. We should not destroy our life by waiting for jobs.

- Triad Interview, working women and NEET youth

Opportunities

Despite facing this challenge, young people in Rangpur have identified opportunities available to them. The most commonly referenced opportunity is entrepreneurship. It is seen as a key avenue for overcoming this issue, empowering young people to take control of their futures. Many feel that they don't have to wait for well-suited jobs but can instead generate income through entrepreneurial activities. They can take advantage of available government training and small capital to kickstart their ventures.

Solutions:

Implementing merit-based job allocation: The youth emphasise the importance of allocating employment opportunities based on qualifications and suitability rather than connections and bribes. They consider this to be the most crucial solution to the problem and call for greater government intervention to promote meritocracy in hiring practices.

Community support and guidance: Influential community members can play a pivotal role in providing guidance and spearheading initiatives to foster self-reliance among the youth. This support system is viewed as essential in preventing distraught youth from resorting to negative paths or seeking solace in substance abuse.



Image: Innovative Research and Consultancy, Rangpur, 2024.

Case Study 8

Entrepreneurship, Rajshahi

Overview

Rajshahi stands out as the region with the highest aspirations to start a business in the next few years. For some, the opportunities for online learning are fuelling their entrepreneurial ambitions. Others are driven by the lack of employment opportunities, coupled with corrupt practices and bribery. However, both groups face similar challenges, primarily the lack of capital to start their own businesses and support from their families, who perceive entrepreneurship as an insecure career path. This case study explores the specific challenges, opportunities, and solutions put forward by the youth in Rajshahi regarding this topic.

Challenges

Some respondents highlighted a key challenge stemming from pressure by family members for youth to pursue higher education and secure 'traditional jobs', typically in state administration or private companies, perceived as more secure than entrepreneurship. This pressure often results in a lack of moral and financial support from family members. Additionally, the lack of capital itself poses a significant obstacle for aspiring entrepreneurs.

Other challenges mentioned include the social stigma and criticism faced by aspirant women entrepreneurs, making it particularly challenging for them to start businesses, and an urban/rural divide in access to resources needed specifically for online businesses, such as the lack of working courier services outside major cities.



It was quite challenging from the beginning, especially without initial support from my family, who preferred me to pursue a traditional job. However, I emphasised the benefits of owning a business, such as the freedom and independence it provides.

- Male, 28, entrepreneur



Image: Innovative Research and Consultancy, Rajshahi, 2024.

Opportunities

A key opportunity identified in entrepreneurship is the perception that it is more honest and less corrupt than other forms of employment, providing an alternative to traditional avenues. Social media and the internet are also recognised as enabling opportunities. Young people are leveraging online courses, tutorials, and social media platforms to establish and grow their businesses. Furthermore, local successful entrepreneurs serve as mentors and role models for the youth, inspiring them to pursue entrepreneurial endeavours.



People are getting influenced by others. People want to try after seeing another people's business.

- Male, 30, influencer



Learning handmade things, sewing. Many are trying to learn from online. (...) Many things are sold through online pages. And we are active in social media more than ever.

- Female, 24, aspiring entrepreneur

Solutions

More success stories: As success stories increasingly influence young people with entrepreneurial aspirations, there is a call for leveraging these stories to create networking opportunities and foster cooperation among aspiring entrepreneurs. Such narratives can also serve to demonstrate to family members the benefits of entrepreneurship, potentially reducing criticism from their side. This is particularly crucial for aspiring female entrepreneurs.

Spreading awareness and expanding training opportunities: While some are aware of available training opportunities and guidance, many overlook them, leaving valuable resources underutilised. Furthermore, additional training opportunities, such as seminars and workshops conducted by established entrepreneurs, would prove beneficial in supporting youth entrepreneurship.

Increased government loans: To address the issue of lacking starting capital, there is a need for more government campaigns and encouragement, including the provision of microloans to support young entrepreneurs in kickstarting their ventures.



Image: Innovative Research and Consultancy, Rajshahi, 2024.

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M&C Saatchi World Services - Research, Insight and Evaluation Team

Ana Babic, Research Manager
Artur Borkowski, Senior Research Manager
Aibek Iliasov, Research Director
Hana Shillova, Senior Research Analyst

BRAC University and BRAC Institute of Governance and Development

Professor Mohammad Mahboob Rahman, PhD, Treasurer, BRAC
Nusrat Jahan, Head of Knowledge Management, BIGD
Mehnaz Rabbani, Head of Operations, Strategic Engagement and Partnership, BIGD

British Council Team

David Knox, Director Programmes, Bangladesh
Maryam Rab, Head of Research Programmes
Proteeti Masud, NFE Programme Coordinator
Abdur Rahaman Khan, NFE Programme Manager
Rhea Bhandari, Research Project Coordinator
Tamim Mostafa, Senior Programme Manager
Toufiq Hasan, Head of Education Bangladesh

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