

Navigating the Future: Youth to Develop Just, Resilient and Sustainable Bangladesh

Bangladesh has achieved remarkable economic growth in recent years, with an average GDP growth of 6-8% over the last decade. However, systemic vulnerabilities persist, particularly in youth employment, quality education, skill development, and climate resilience. Youth unemployment is nearly three times the national average, pointing to a critical need for market-relevant skills. Gender parity in education has improved, yet women face barriers in workforce entry, with many in not in employment or education NEET (Not in Education, Employment, or Training). Climate change adds further challenges, threatening economic stability. Recently, political movements in Bangladesh, particularly following the resignation of the prime minister and subsequent change in government as a result of the student-led movement, have exposed further instability, impacting the country's youth. This policy brief highlights barriers to youth education, employment, and services, emphasizing climate change impacts, political dynamics, and the importance of STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) and digital literacy. It explores youth aspirations and fears for a new Bangladesh shaped by the recent July movement and stresses youth engagement to inform policies on jobs, education, and climate adaptation.

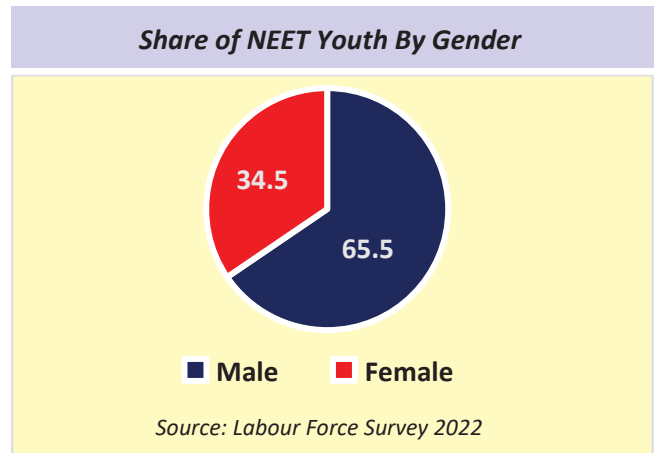


Figure 1: Youth Vulnerabilities in Bangladesh

<p>Youth face systemic vulnerabilities in socio economic and political spheres.</p>	<p>Economic inequality and gender disparity limit youth participation in economic, social and civic activities.</p>	<p>Political instability and corruption impact access to jobs.</p>
<p>Youth vulnerability (socio economic and others) is particularly pronounced in climate change vulnerable disaster-prone areas.</p>	<p>Youth from lower socio economic backgrounds often face Limited access to quality education and employment opportunities.</p>	<p>Infrastructure and societal attitudes often fail to accommodate youth needs.</p>

Bangladesh's youth face interconnected economic, educational, and environmental challenges. The education system often does not align with market demands, resulting in graduates lacking the skills required by employers. Among unemployed youth, 27.8% possess tertiary education, 23.8% have secondary education, and 19.7% have completed higher secondary education. These figures underscore a significant misalignment between the skills imparted through formal academic curricula and the competencies sought by the

labour market. **(Table 1)**. The disproportionately higher unemployment rates among those with advanced education suggest that current educational pathways may not adequately prepare graduates for market demands, highlighting a pressing need for curriculum reform and stronger linkages between education systems and industry requirements. Rural-urban disparities in education quality further marginalize young people in rural areas, while climate change intensifies vulnerabilities by disrupting education and livelihoods

Table 1: Unemployed youth aged 15–29 in total unemployment, by education level, sex and area (%)

Education Level	National			Rural	Urban
	Male	Female	Total	Total	Total
None	1.6	1.4	1.5	1.7	1.3
Primary	10.3	7	9.1	9.5	8.1
Secondary	24.3	22.9	23.8	25.2	20.5
Higher Secondary	20.8	17.6	19.7	20.4	17.9
Tertiary	25.1	32.6	27.8	25.9	32.4
Others	1.7	0.4	1.2	1.5	0.7
Total youth unemployed	83.8	82	83.2	84.1	80.9

Source: Labour Force Survey, 2022

Moreover, those with higher levels of education, such as higher secondary and tertiary, are more likely to remain unemployed for longer periods (Table 2).

Table 2: Unemployed youth aged 15–29, by duration in unemployment, and education (%)

Education	< 1 month	1-6 months	6-12 months	1-2 years	2 years and above
None	36.3	38	14.9	8.7	2.1
Primary	33.3	44.7	14.9	5.5	1.5
Secondary	27.4	44.9	18.4	6.7	2.6
Higher Secondary	15	39	24.6	14.3	7.2
Tertiary	10.6	33.7	21.4	19.6	14.7
Others	20	56	11.7	12.3	0
Total	19.5	39.8	20.3	12.8	7.6

Source: Labour Force Survey, 2022

The performance of Bangladeshi universities in the QS World University Rankings, highlights significant challenges in global competitiveness and employability outcomes. While the University of Dhaka (DU) is the highest-ranked Bangladeshi university, it stands at 554 in the 2025 rankings, which is far behind the top institutions in neighboring countries (Table 3). India boasts six universities ranked higher than DU, and Pakistan has three. More strikingly, across the Asia region, 326 universities rank higher than DU, underlining the substantial gap in performance and international standing of Bangladeshi institutions.

The broader performance of Bangladeshi universities reflects a systemic failure to align higher education

Table 3: Bangladesh's Universities in QS World University Ranking

University	QS Ranking 2024	QS Ranking 2025
DU	691-700	554
BUET	801-850	761-770
NSU	851-900	901-950
BRACU	1001-1200	1001-1200
CUET	1201-1400	1201-1400
DIU	1201-1400	1201-1400
JU	1201-1400	1201-1400
KU	1401+	1201-1400
KUET	1201-1400	1201-1400
RU	1401+	1201-1400
SUST	1401+	1201-1400
EWU	1201-1400	1401+
IUBAT	1401+	1401+
SUB	1401+	1401+
UIU	1201-1400	1401+

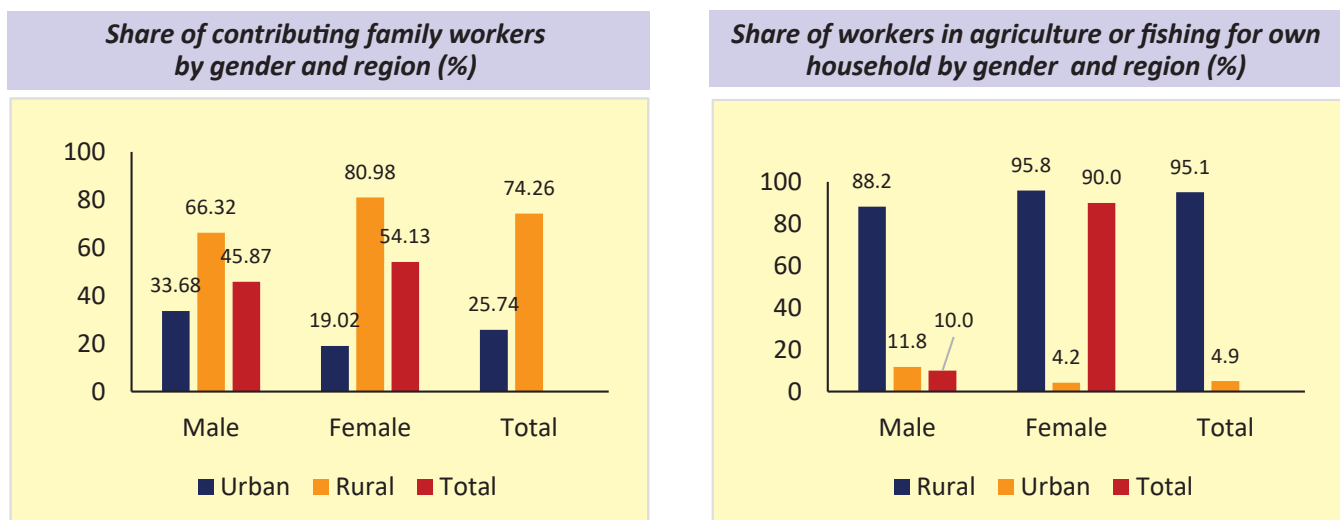
Source: 2025 QS World University Ranking

with the demands of a globalized and innovation-driven economy. The lack of competitive performance in research and international engagement is stark when considering that Bangladesh has no universities in the top 500 globally, unlike India and Pakistan. Despite notable improvements in rankings for some universities, such as DU and BUET, the country's higher education system continues to struggle in providing pathways for innovation, global collaboration, and meaningful employment for its graduates.

The Labour Force Survey (LFS) 2022 highlights a notable trend in youth employment, with female youth accounting for 50.3% of total female employment, significantly higher than the 26.7% share of male youth in total male employment. Additionally, the unemployment rate among rural female youth appears lower compared to their male and urban counterparts. However, a closer examination of the data reveals that the seemingly high employment rate and low unemployment rate among female youth, particularly rural female youth, are primarily driven by their extensive involvement in unpaid labour (Figure 2).

This includes contributing family work and engaging in agriculture and fishing for household consumption, activities that, while crucial for subsistence, do not translate into financial independence or formal economic inclusion.

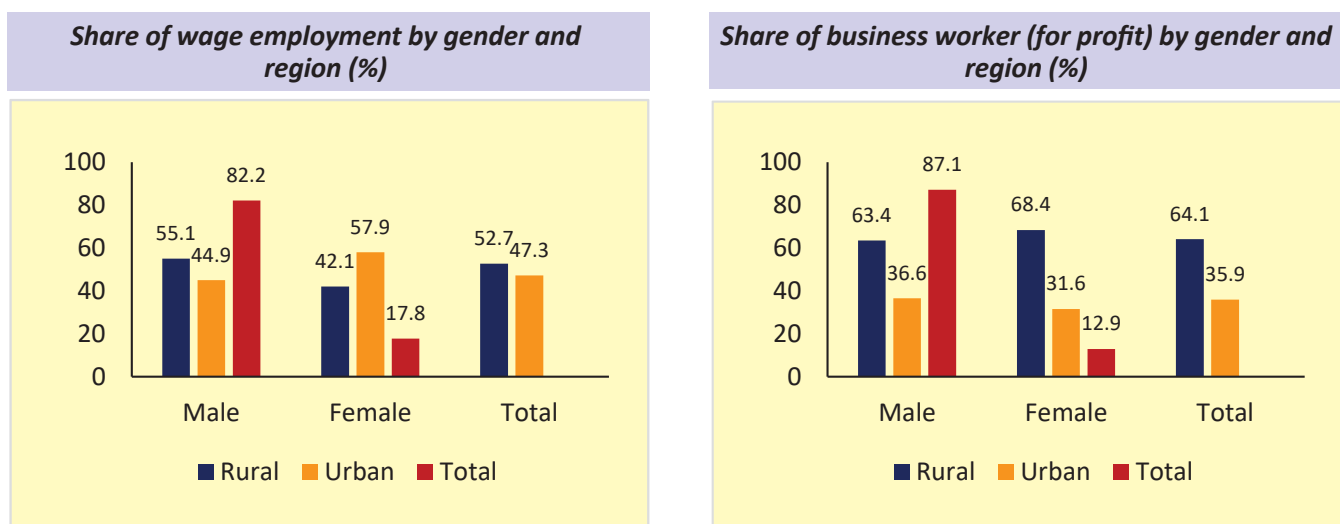
Figure 2: Share of Workers in Unpaid Labour



Source: Author's Compilation from the LFS 2022

When looking only at paid jobs, like those with wages or profit-making work, the situation for rural female youth in Bangladesh changes drastically (**Figure 3**). Their share of paid employment drops significantly, showing a big gap in their access to economic opportunities. This gap highlights the challenges rural young women face in moving from unpaid work, like helping their families or farming for household needs, to formal, income-earning jobs.

Figure 3: Share of Workers in Paid Labour



Source: Author's Compilation from the LFS 2022

Impact of Climate Change on Youth

Bangladesh's vulnerability to climate change poses significant challenges for its youth, particularly in rural and coastal areas. Agriculture and fishing, key livelihood sectors, are severely affected by extreme weather, driving economic instability and pushing families into poverty. This forces many young people into hazardous labour or migration to urban areas, where they often face exploitative conditions. Economic strain also reduces investment in girls' education, leading to higher rates of early marriage during crises.

Education is frequently disrupted as natural disasters close schools, which are often repurposed as shelters. Many youths drop out to help with recovery efforts, while the lack of digital infrastructure in rural areas deepens the digital divide. Health risks are also on the rise, with record-breaking heatwaves, flooding, and salinity intrusion leading to heat-related illnesses, waterborne diseases, and malnutrition. Mental health issues such as anxiety and trauma are growing due to displacement and economic loss.

Recurring floods and rising sea levels further disrupt livelihoods, infrastructure, and access to clean water in coastal areas like Khulna and Satkhira. These compounded challenges severely impact the opportunities, education, and well-being of Bangladesh’s youth, emphasizing the urgent need for sustainable solutions.

Youth Engagement in National Discourse/Politics and Decision Making

Bangladesh has faced decades of political volatility, marked by protests, leadership shifts, and unrest, which disrupt investment, infrastructure, and public services. Youth bear the brunt of these disruptions, facing challenges in securing stable jobs and career paths.

Figure 4: Political and Institutional Effects on Youths

Political instability leads to economic uncertainty, impacting job creation and education.

Weak governance & corruption limit funding for youth development.

Outdated curricula & institutional inefficiencies hinder skill development.

Lack of vocational training limits youth employment in emerging sectors.

Political decisions shape economic policies that impact youth job markets.

Institutional barriers, like bureaucracy & limited funding, block youth entrepreneurship.

Low youth representation in political processes limits their influence on policy.

Despite this, youth have historically been at the forefront of social and political movements, advocating for reform, justice, and accountability. Modern youth activism has grown through social media and grassroots efforts, but political instability often suppresses these voices, with activists facing threats and censorship. A disconnect persists between youth aspirations and formal political decision-making, limiting their impact.

The July Movement: Youth Activism for Change

The July Movement represented a turning point in youth activism, driven by frustration with corruption and stagnation in education, employment, and political transparency. Structurally, this movement was characterized by grassroots mobilization, the use of social media to amplify voices, and decentralized leadership. It brought together students, young professionals, and activists who collectively demanded an equitable society, merit-based recruitment practices, better quality in education, and the strengthening of institutions to uphold transparency and justice. Youth expectations were high. They envisioned a Bangladesh free from the shackles of entrenched corruption, where recruitment would be based on merit rather than nepotism, education would be a pathway to empowerment rather than a symbol of systemic failure, and freedom of expression would no longer be curtailed.

Figure 5: Youth Expectations and Fears about the Aftermath of the Movement

Expectations	Fears
Transparent governance, strengthened institutions, and freedom of expression.	Fear of regression into authoritarianism and past injustices.
A significant reduction in corruption within government and public services.	Concerns over lack of substantial progress in youth empowerment.
Reforms to enhance education quality, accessibility, and relevance.	Worry that political instability could undo recent advancements.
Policies promoting job creation, fair recruitment, and equal opportunities.	Fear of crackdowns on freedom of expression and critical voices.
Policies addressing inequality, fostering unity, and protecting marginalized groups.	Concerns about insufficient efforts to sustain institutional reforms.
Climate resilience initiatives and sustainable development policies.	Fear of political violence and destabilization affecting daily life.

Source: Author’s Compilation from focused group discussions

These aspirations reflected a desire to address long-standing societal inequities and a hope for a brighter, more inclusive future. However, fears have grown as the initial momentum of the July Movement appears to wane. These fears stem from the realization that their expectations may not materialize as anticipated. Despite the initial promise, the enduring influence of entrenched interests and the lack of substantial reforms have created a sense of disillusionment among many youths. Concerns about political volatility, token reforms, and the historical tendency for movements to be co-opted or sidelined further exacerbate this skepticism. The diminishing results of their early expectations fuel fears that the movement might become another chapter in Bangladesh's history of unfulfilled promises.

A Consensus to Divided Outlook

Bangladesh's youth are now navigating a divided outlook. On one hand, there is cautious optimism—a belief in the collective power of youth as agents of change, inspired by the successes of previous movements worldwide. On the other hand, there is deep-seated wariness due to the country's history of political interference and stagnation. Many young people fear that without sustained effort and structural reforms, the July Movement's impact may fade, leaving the same cycles of corruption and inequality intact. Amid this divided sentiment, a consensus is emerging about the need for continuous activism and inclusive dialogue. The youth recognize that achieving meaningful change requires unity across societal lines and a long-term commitment to advocacy. Building coalitions with other stakeholders—such as civil society organizations, academics, and reform-minded policymakers—has become a focal point for ensuring that the movement's ideals do not dissipate.

Recommendations

Revamp Education for Skills Development

- Enhance the quality of education with a focus on STEM to address high graduate unemployment and prepare youth for emerging industries.
- Expand vocational training programs and promote them widely to ensure they reach rural and underserved youth. Programs should prioritize high-demand sectors like digital literacy, artificial intelligence, and green technology to align with future job market needs.
- Invest in improving infrastructure for education, including access to digital learning platforms, particularly in rural and coastal areas where the digital divide is prominent.

Empowering Youth for a Resilient Workforce

- Promote employment initiatives that focus on bridging the skills mismatch, enabling young people to transition into formal, remunerative jobs.
- Provide targeted support for women and marginalized groups to enhance their participation in wage employment and entrepreneurship opportunities. Address cultural and societal barriers that limit their economic engagement.

- Ensure programs like SEIP (Skills for Employment Investment Program) and YES (Youth Empowerment through Skills) Centre emphasize both traditional trades and future-ready skills, fostering long-term employability.

Bridging the Digital Divide with a Gender Perspective

- Ensure equitable access to digital resources and education for youth in rural and urban areas, with targeted efforts to reduce gender disparities in digital literacy and technology use.
- Implement community programs that empower girls and women to leverage digital tools for education, employment, and entrepreneurship.
- Develop policies that address the cultural and structural barriers limiting access to technology for marginalized groups, ensuring inclusivity in digital transformation efforts.

Building Resilience to Climate Change Among Youth

- Design youth-centered locally led climate adaptation strategies, including skill-building for green jobs and disaster management.
- Develop initiatives to protect livelihoods in climate-vulnerable sectors like agriculture and fisheries, mitigating economic instability caused by environmental shocks.

- Strengthen education continuity during climate disasters by building resilient infrastructure and ensuring schools are equipped to handle emergencies without prolonged closures.

Addressing Policy Implementation Gaps

- Improve monitoring and evaluation frameworks for youth-focused programs to ensure accountability and adaptability based on real-world outcomes.
- Secure long-term funding for initiatives, moving away from short-term, project-based approaches to ensure sustainability and impact.
- Prioritize transparency and reduce bureaucracy in youth program delivery to increase accessibility and effectiveness.

Promoting Youth-Centric Governance

- Involve youth in policy-making processes, ensuring their voices are heard in decisions that impact their future.
- Create a stable and inclusive political environment for youth to thrive in education, employment, and leadership.
- Promote civic engagement among young people through grassroots and digital platforms,

empowering them to lead change in their communities.

Necessary Policies to Reduce Youth Exclusion

- Develop and enforce anti-discrimination policies to combat exclusion based on gender, socio-economic status, or geography, ensuring equitable opportunities for all youth.
- Establish platforms that bridge the gap between government and youth, fostering dialogue and co-creation of policies that directly address their needs.
- Integrate youth-specific considerations into broader development plans to ensure their active inclusion across sectors.

Strengthening Youth Mental Health and Well-being

- Scale up initiatives to address the mental health challenges faced by youth, providing counseling and creating safe spaces for emotional support.
- Integrate mental health education into school curricula to build resilience and awareness among young people.
- Promote community-based mental health initiatives that offer gender-sensitive support systems for underserved youth.

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About ActionAid

ActionAid is a global movement of people working together to further human rights for all and defeat poverty. We believe everyone has the power within them to create change for themselves, their families and communities. ActionAid is a catalyst for that change.

ActionAid works in over 70 countries across the world with more than 15 million people. We have a 'bottom up' approach to decision making. Our secretariat is located in Johannesburg, South Africa with hubs in Asia.

We believe that we can only achieve our goals by working collaboratively-locally, nationally and globally- with people in poverty, our supporters, partners, and peers. We are more powerful and effective when we work together.

About SANEM

SANEM, launched in January 2007 in Dhaka, is a non-profit research organization registered with the Registrar of Joint Stock Companies and Firms in Bangladesh. It is also a network of economists and policy makers in South Asia with a special emphasis on economic modeling.

SANEM aims to promote the production, exchange and dissemination of basic research knowledge in the areas of international trade, macro economy, poverty, labor market, environment, political economy and economic modeling. It seeks to produce objective, high quality, country- and South Asian region-specific policy and thematic research. SANEM contributes in governments' policy-making by providing research supports both at individual and organizational capacities.



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