

CITIZEN'S PLATFORM
Working Paper

2

COVID-19 and Youth in Bangladesh

The Three Challenges

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Towfiqul Islam Khan
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Tamara-E-Tabassum



Citizen's Platform for SDGs, Bangladesh
এসডিজি বাস্তবায়নে নাগরিক প্ল্যাটফর্ম, বাংলাদেশ

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Published in July 2021 by

Citizen's Platform for SDGs, Bangladesh

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Citation: Bhattacharya, D., Khan, T. I., Altaf, N. M. and Tabassum, T. E. (2021). *COVID-19 and Youths in Bangladesh: The Three Challenges*. Citizen's Platform Working Paper 2. Dhaka: Citizen's Platform for SDGs, Bangladesh.

About the Platform

Citizen's Platform for SDGs, Bangladesh was formed in June 2016 with the objective of providing a policy stage to the non-state actors (NSAs) in Bangladesh to contribute to the implementation of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The Platform seeks to enhance transparency and accountability in the SDG process at the country level. It particularly aims to promote the 2030 Agenda's pledge to *Leave No One Behind* in the process of development.

Since its inception, the Platform has emerged as the largest forum for the NSAs that include a unique blend of non-government development organisations, civil society organisations (CSOs) and private sector associations in Bangladesh. The Platform currently has over 120 Partner Organisations. These organisations work on knowledge generation as well as monitoring of national development policies towards delivering SDGs by 2030. Moreover, the Platform undertakes policy advocacy and stirs new conversations on relevant challenges and solutions. All these are accomplished through regular conferences and dialogues at the national level, capacity development workshops, international events and webinars.

At the beginning of its journey five years ago, the Platform sought to outline the scope of the partnership between the government and NGOs and explore the role of the private sector in implementing the SDGs. It emphasised the importance of SDG 16 (Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions) as central to the overall delivery of the 2030 Agenda. The Platform later provided intellectual inputs to identify the population groups at risk of being left behind in the attainment of the SDGs in Bangladesh. Subsequently, one of its highlighted focuses was youth, a systematically vulnerable community in Bangladesh in view of the country's journey through a window of demographic opportunity. The following years saw the Platform bringing together more than 50 Partner Organisations that actively contributed to documenting Bangladesh's progress towards attaining selected SDGs for review during the High Level Political Forum (HLPF). The Platform, along with a dozen of its Partner Organisations also prepared a set of thematic policy briefs with a view to contributing the perspectives of non-state actors towards the Voluntary National Review (VNR) of Bangladesh.

Since the scourge of COVID-19 unleashed itself in the first quarter of 2020, the Citizen's Platform realised the advantage and potential of its substantive network. It immediately engaged in conceptualising initiatives that could address the crisis and particularly uphold the interests of the "left behind". Thus the year was marked by the Platform's many activities widely discussing the implications of COVID-19 at the grassroots level, on the SDGs, and on the pathways towards an inclusive recovery and resilience. Towards this end, the Platform along with its Partner Organisations embarked on a flagship research and outreach programme titled "Strengthening Citizen's Engagement in Delivering SDGs in view of COVID-19 Pandemic". A number of knowledge products will be created under the programme, to be followed by policy advocacy.

In view of the above, the Citizen's Platform is introducing a Working Paper Series, which will feature pertinent research on issues related to SDG delivery with a particular focus on the marginalised and vulnerable communities in Bangladesh. The present paper is the first of this new series.

Series Editor: *Dr Debapriya Bhattacharya*, Convenor, Citizen's Platform for SDGs, Bangladesh.

About the Authors

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a2i	Aspire to Innovate
A4AI	Alliance for Affordable Internet
BBS	Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics
CBO	Community-based Organisation
CPD	Centre for Policy Dialogue
CSO	Civil Society Organisations
FGD	Focus Group Discussion
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
HLPF	High-Level Political Forum
ICT	Information and Communications Technology
ILO	International Labour Organization
LDC	Least Developed Country
LFS	Labour Force Survey
NEET	Not in Education, Employment or Training
NGO	Non-Government Organisation
NSA	Non-state Actors
RMG	Readymade Garment
SDG	Sustainable Development Goal
VNR	Voluntary National Review

1. THE COVID-19 CONTEXT

With more than one-third population representing youths¹, Bangladesh is currently experiencing a 'demographic window of opportunity'. If this opportunity is to be translated into a 'demographic dividend', youths must participate meaningfully in the national economy in general and during post-COVID recovery in particular. As is known, the COVID-19 scourge has imposed extreme health hazards as well as alarming economic risks on the country since its onset in March 2020. The 'second wave' of the pandemic in April 2021 has further aggravated the overall socio-economic and health-related situation in the country.

Among the population groups in Bangladesh, youths are affected with no exception due to the pandemic. Studies on the impact of COVID-19 have shown that youths are facing multiple vulnerabilities—exacerbating their pre-existing vulnerabilities and creating new ones (Bhattacharya, Khan, & Khan, 2021). Pre-existing vulnerabilities are those which are traditionally affecting young people. These include limited access to internet services, dropping out of the formal education system, and marginalisation of physically disabled persons. On the other hand, the new set of vulnerabilities include deepening of the digital divide among youth groups, diminished marketability of their skills and laid-off workers returning from abroad.

As Bangladesh seeks to formulate a post-pandemic recovery strategy, it has become pertinent to give due policy attention to the youth community. This must be done while keeping an eye on the community's structural handicaps as well as the vulnerabilities afflicting them.

1.1 Lessons learnt through practice

Citizen's Platform for SDGs, Bangladesh, since its inception, focused on issues directly concerning the youth over the years.² In Bangladesh, there are several organisations, platforms and initiatives which work on youth issues.³ The Partner Organisations of the Citizen's Platform, which are running youth-focused programmes, have brought to the fore a number of insightful lessons. The major focus of these organisations manifested in the development of an efficient network between the youths and public policy providers. This is to ensure that the youths are enrolled in the (formal) education establishments, enjoy decent employment opportunities, and voices were recognised. Internet accessibility and the increased popularity of social media have fuelled the pursuits of these youth organisations. Additionally, these youth-focused organisations have found it useful to follow a multi-sector approach and take on board cross-cutting issues such as poverty, gender and environment. Some of these organisations exclusively focus on young people from the "left behind" and under-privileged sections such as the physically challenged, transgender and indigenous communities. Most of these organisations carry out right-based capacity building and advocacy.

Analysis of the work experience of these youth focussed organisations brings forward three major lessons. *First*, there appear to be two distinct groups within the youth community in Bangladesh—

¹According to Bangladesh National Youth Policy 2017, youths are defined as individuals aged between 18 to 35 years, while the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS) defined individuals aged between 15 to 29 years as youth in Bangladesh (BBS, 2018).

²Annex 1 presents a list of youth-related activities of the Citizen's Platform for SDGs, Bangladesh.

³A selected list of such organisations, platforms and initiatives is presented in Annex 2.

the 'engaged' and the 'disengaged'. It may be safely deduced that the latter is more numerous. The 'disengaged' group of youths is recognised as those young people who are not enrolled in the formal education system, employment or training. It has been mentioned elsewhere that the majority of women fall in the 'disengaged' group (Citizen's Platform for SDGs, Bangladesh, 2020). It has emerged from focus group discussions (FGDs) that the disengaged youths are more susceptible to negative thinking, which results in deterioration of mental health, usually coupled with the loss of jobs or drop out of educational institutions, particularly during the pandemic.

Second, one of the persistent concerns of the youths in Bangladesh relates to the lack of access to public agencies which are designated to provide youth-supportive services. Such a situation is underpinned by poor dissemination of information about the available services as well as the weak coordination among the concerned public agencies. It was pointed out that in the government training centres, there is a quota for the students from marginalised communities. However, such student quota, in most cases, remains unutilised. Youths from the marginalised communities are often not aware of the existence of such quota policy (Citizen's Platform for SDGs, Bangladesh, 2020).

Third, the youth-related public interventions are usually directed to the manifestation of the youth problems, not to the factors causing the problems. For example, the phenomenon of a high rate of unemployment among the "educated" youths in Bangladesh is largely caused by their low competency level. This low competency level is created by the overall weak schooling, particularly in the rural areas. So without strengthening the primary and secondary schooling system, it will hardly be possible to employ these youths properly.

Finally, it has been noted that the challenges faced by the youths cannot be solved by the limited interventions of non-government organisations (NGOs) and community-based organisations (CBOs). The solution possibly lies in scaling up the implementation of the relevant public policies in a transparent, effective and accountable way⁴. Meanwhile, a public-private partnership, in this case, is expected to yield good results.

1.2 Objectives of the paper

Against the background of the above, the key objective of the present paper is to explore the contemporary concerns of the youths in the context of the pandemic in order to illuminate the national recovery agenda. Systematic engagements of the Citizen's Platform for SDGs, Bangladesh with the young people have brought to the fore the aggravated challenges in the following three areas: i) employment, ii) education and skill development, and iii) digital access⁵. These three issues were also highlighted in the "Youth Declaration" adopted at a National Conference of the Youth in 2018 (Youth Conference, 2018).

Perception surveys and structured investigations have revealed that the opportunity for job placement and skills development have further narrowed for the youths during COVID-19. The pandemic has fast-tracked the digitisation of many essential services, including education and employment opportunities. Regrettably, the youth population, who previously did not have digital

⁴Moazzem and Shibly (2020) suggested that job related information such as advertisement, participation and selection process needs to be transparent for better accountability.

⁵For a brief on youth-related studies, dialogues and meetings recently carried out by the Platform, see Annex 1.

access, have become further marginalised in the process. The slowdown of economic activities, leading to a significant drop in family income, has also resulted in a higher dropout from educational establishments, particularly for female students.

In view of the above, the paper takes a closer look at the three mentioned issues.

1.3 Methodological approach of the paper

The paper has followed a mixed methodology of qualitative and quantitative analysis to address the stated objectives. Empirical and policy analyses of the paper build on the earlier studies and events carried out by the Platform. Discussions that took place at a specific youth-related webinar during COVID-19 were also fed into this study. Experience of the youth focussed organisations of the Platform also added value to this paper.

Further, to ascertain the dimensions of the multidimensional vulnerabilities faced by the youths amid the pandemic, the Citizen's Platform for SDGs, Bangladesh, conducted a survey on the youth population of Bangladesh. For details on the survey design, see Annexe 3. The findings of the survey were also validated through a webinar. The results of this survey have been incorporated in the present paper. Given the preponderance of young marginalised people among the survey respondents, the analytical finding concerns itself more with the "left behind" communities.

In the analysis of data and information in the paper, an attempt was made to make a distinction between the structural and policy challenges faced by the youth community in general and how these have aggravated during the pandemic period. This distinction has underpinned the policy suggestions offered in the paper. The analytical approach further emphasises the "disengaged youth" as against the engaged ones.

1.4 Layout of the paper

Following the introductory section, Section 2 provides an overview of the state of the youths in Bangladesh from the perspectives of labour force participation, education and digital access. The subsequent three core sections (Section 3, 4 and 5) are devoted to issues related to access to education, employment and digital services. The final section (Section 6) presents the policy outlook and recommendations concerning three priority areas addressed in the paper.

2. YOUTH SITUATION IN BANGLADESH: STRUCTURAL FEATURES IN THE AREAS OF EMPLOYMENT, EDUCATION AND DIGITAL ACCESS

This section provides an overview of the situation of the youths in Bangladesh. While doing so, the sub-sections draw on the data from the Labour Force Survey (LFS) as well as from other sources concerning education and digital access. Other official documents, including the Eighth Five Year Plan (2021-25), have been highlighted as appropriate.

2.1 Youth participation in the labour force

Youth unemployment situation in Bangladesh may be observed through the analysis of labour force participation trends. It was estimated that 2.1 million youths would enter the labour force every

year in Bangladesh between 2013 and 2023 (World Bank, 2013). According to Table 2.1, the overall participation rate of the youths (between 15-29 years) in the country's labour force is 31.6 per cent in 2016-17. As may be expected, the activity rate among the youths gradually rises with their age. Incidentally, the participation rate of young women is higher (35 per cent) than that of their male counterparts (30.1 per cent). However, a marginally higher labour force participation rate of young women in comparison to young men as well as a marginally lower unemployment rate among the former vis-à-vis the latter do not indicate a better employment situation for young female workers. The fact that young women are joining the labour market in greater numbers from an early age also indicates higher rates of their dropout from secondary education.

Table 1: Youth labour force (as % of total labour force)

Age group	National level (2016-17)		
	Male	Female	Total
15 – 19	7.4	6.3	7.0
20 – 24	9.6	12.0	10.4
25 – 29	13.1	16.7	14.2
Total youths	30.1	35.0	31.6

Source: LFS (2016-17).

Curiously, the labour force participation rate for youths fell in 2016-17 compared to that in 2013. While the youth labour force participation in 2013 was 38.5 per cent of the total labour force (LFS, 2013), it discernibly fell to 31.6 per cent. These figures indicate the deteriorating employment conditions for young people in Bangladesh.

According to LFS 2016-17 data, total unemployed youths represents 79.6 per cent of the total unemployed population (Table 2.2)⁶. The share of male youths stands at 80.2 per cent, which is marginally higher than that of their female counterparts (79.0 per cent). It needs to be noted that the share of unemployment is the highest with the 20-24 years age group. As is known from the other figures derived from the LFS, a large part of the female workforce is engaged in the informal sector (including non-wage agricultural jobs)⁷.

Table 2: Youth unemployment rate (share of total unemployed)

Age group	National level (2016-17)		
	Male	Female	Total
15 – 19	25.5	16.7	21.1
20 – 24	29.8	29.5	29.6
25 – 29	24.9	32.9	28.9
Total youths	80.2	79.0	79.6

Source: LFS (2016-17).

⁶Regrettably, no new data on labour force dynamics has been released by the BBS in the last four years.

⁷LFS 2016-17 (BBS, 2018) further indicated that about 85.1 per cent of the total employment in Bangladesh were in the informal sector whereas a disproportionate percentage of total female employment (more than 92 per cent) were involved in informal activities in 2016-17.

What is further worrying is the reverse relationship that may be observed between the education level and employment status. Table 2.3 depicts that the higher the level of education, the higher is the possibility of a young person in Bangladesh remaining unemployed. At the national level, the share of unemployed youth who have achieved the secondary level of education, i.e., have only finished school, is the highest (28 per cent).

Table 3: Youth unemployed as % of total unemployed, by education level

Education level	National level (2016-17)		
	Male	Female	Total
None	2.6	5.5	4.0
Primary	11.6	11.8	11.7
Secondary	25.6	30.4	28.0
Higher secondary	24.4	20.1	22.3
Tertiary	15.5	11.2	13.4
Others	0.6	0.0	0.3
Total Youth	80.2	79.0	79.6

Source: LFS (2016-17).

What is further disturbing is that a significant portion (13.4 per cent) of the youths with tertiary level education comprises the total unemployed cohort even. On the other hand, youths with no formal education represent only 4 per cent of the total unemployment at the national level. Young women reduce the employment gap with their male counterparts with the rise of educational attainment beyond post-secondary level. This implies that higher educational attainment among women could be a great equaliser against gender disparity.

The level of economic activity of the youths may be potentially assessed by another indicator, i.e., the share of population not in education, employment or training (NEET). According to the International Labour Organization (ILO), the share of youths NEET in Bangladesh is 16.2 per cent higher than the global average of 21.8 per cent and 9.4 per cent higher than the South Asian regional average (ILO, 2017). At the national level, youths NEET stood at 29.8 per cent (Table 2.4). Moreover, the share of female youths NEET in Bangladesh is significantly higher than their male counterparts. It may be, however, noted that the share of young men NEET falls with age. It is just the opposite in the case of young women. These trends are consistent with trends observed in the case of unemployment situation.

Table 4: Share of youths NEET within working age population (%)

Age group	National level (2016-17)		
	Male	Female	Total
15 – 19	9.7	29.5	18.9
20 – 24	8.6	57.8	36.0
25 – 29	5.7	59.2	35.7
Total youths	8.1	49.4	29.8

Source: LFS (2016-17).

In this context, the employment situation of young migrant workers is a special case in point. Even though the performance of overseas employment creation is better than domestic employment generation, the unemployment rate of migrant workers within the country is still a daunting issue for the country. Total unemployment rate for young migrants stood at 8.4 per cent, whereas the unemployment rates of male and female migrant workers were 4.2 per cent and 11.3 per cent, respectively. Nonetheless, the corresponding numbers for domestic workers remain much higher.

It is evident that the employment conditions of female migrant workers are worse off than that of male migrant workers. The major reason behind this is that young women are not repeatedly seeking employment overseas due to an array of safety-related issues. Revealed cases of harassment and torture of Bangladeshi female migrant workers by foreign employers in the Middle Eastern countries have refrained themselves from seeking further employment overseas. On the other hand, they also could not any gainful opportunity in the country.

In brief, the overall employment situation of youths shows an unsettling scenario where the unemployment rate of youths and youths NEET are relatively high. The reverse relation between education and employment status is also a matter of pressing concern.

Young women workers are lagging behind in accessing employment opportunities which indicates their marginalised condition. The overwhelming portion of the female workers is located in the informal sector. However, higher education attainment by young women appears to reduce the gender gap.

The specific concern regarding the migrant workers is that they remain unemployed once they return to the country. On one hand, the high cost of securing a job overseas may create a debt burden, while on the other hand, it may demotivate workers to go overseas again. As mentioned earlier and as we shall see later, the pandemic has further deteriorated the employment situation of young people in Bangladesh.

2.2 Level of educational attainment

Over the last decade, Bangladesh has made great strides in improving literacy and overall educational attainment. However, issues related to the quality of education as well as unequal access by disadvantaged communities remain quite visible. The present section takes a selective look at these issues.

The net enrolment rate of children and youths in Bangladesh falls along with the rise of the level of education. Alternatively, the net enrolment rates among female students at the secondary and higher secondary levels are higher than that of their male counterparts (Table 2.5). This is a reflection of the "catching up effect" as there is a substantive backlog of young women who did not go to school earlier. However, a large portion of these female students does not get to complete their education.

In contrast, there is a significant gender gap with regard to the completion rate of secondary schooling. For example, in 2017, 66.57 per cent of enrolled male children finished secondary education, while the comparable figure for the female children was 58.48 per cent, indicating a gap of about 8 per cent. Curiously, at the primary level, the completion rate is higher among female students. It goes without saying that at the subsequent levels of education, this indicator of gender disparity among children deteriorates further.

Table 5: Enrolment and completion rates in primary, secondary & higher secondary levels of education (%)

Level/Year	Gross Enrolment Rate (%)			Net Enrolment Rate (%)			Completion Rate (%)		
	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total
Primary									
2010	103.20	112.40	107.70	92.20	97.60	94.80	59.70	60.70	60.20
2015	105.00	113.40	109.20	97.10	98.80	97.70	76.10	83.00	79.60
2017	108.10	115.40	111.70	97.66	98.29	97.97	78.28	84.08	81.20
2019	106.15	113.20	109.49	97.56	98.01	97.74	80.80	83.20	82.10
Secondary									
2010	49.59	62.62	55.81	44.45	55.09	49.53	42.71	46.43	44.74
2015	67.75	77.84	72.78	62.16	71.85	67.00	66.28	54.08	59.71
2017	68.60	81.90	74.64	63.59	74.38	68.79	66.57	58.48	62.19
Higher Secondary									
2010	n/a	n/a	41.09	n/a	n/a	27.72	n/a	n/a	62.64
2015	n/a	n/a	38.99	n/a	n/a	28.25	n/a	n/a	79.30
2017	n/a	n/a	40.50	n/a	n/a	37.24	n/a	n/a	80.11

Source: APSC 2019, MOPME; Pocketbook of Education Statistics 2017, BANBEIS.

Note: n/a denotes not available.

However, the targets for 2025 mentioned in the table indicate that the government has identified that the education completion rate is not only to be improved further, but the concerned gender gap has to be brought down as well.

From the perspective of our present study, it is not only important for us to understand the aggregate situation but also the situation of the disadvantaged children in terms of access to education. In 2019, 76,522 children with physical disabilities were enrolled in primary schools in Bangladesh (Table 2.6). Out of these enrolled children, about 44.5 per cent of them were girl children. The target set for 2025 is the annual enrolment of 106,500 children with disabilities, of which about 46 per cent will be girl children. Regrettably, due to the lack of relevant data, we cannot establish the coverage rate of children with physical disabilities. However, efforts to make them visible in public policy accounting are a step forward.

Table 6: Number of children with disabilities enrolled at the primary level

Year	Male	Female	Total
2014	42,523	33,999	76,522
2019	54,442	43,869	98,311
2025 (Target)	56,500	50,000	106,500

Source: Seventh and Eighth Five Plans, Bangladesh Planning Commission.

The government has also set an additional education sector goal by accounting for children from poor families attending a school. Almost two-thirds of the children from poor families are going to school at the secondary level, while the share drops to almost half at the higher secondary level (Table 2.7).

Table 7: Share of poor children attending school

Performance Indicator	2018 (Base Year)	2025 (Target)
Share of poor children attending secondary schools (%)	72	80
Share of poor children attending higher secondary schools (%)	51	60

Source Eighth Five Plan, Bangladesh Planning Commission

This implies that children from poorer families, those who are deprived of education at an increasing share by the level of education, may also become “disengaged” from the mainstream economy and society. Interestingly, the target set for 2025 for the inclusion of these children from poor families does not seem to be ambitious enough. These targets do not even aspire to provide primary education to 100 per cent of the children from poor families by 2025.

Our foregoing analysis indicates that while there are clear signs of improvements in the education sector of Bangladesh, the aggregate numbers need to improve further. It is important to note that there remains a significant gap in terms of male-female ratio in completion rate, the number of children with a disability attending school and the share of children from poor families accessing education. Further, these gaps tend to increase at higher levels in the education system.

It needs to be explored whether these gaps accelerated during the pandemic leading to potential disengagement of this section of the youth community in Bangladesh.

2.3 Access to digital services

While one observes expansion of the use of digital services during the pandemic, the overall situation in the sector remains comparatively unsatisfactory. This observation remains particularly true for the disadvantaged section of the youth community, leading to the possibility of their alienation from the mainstream economic and social milieu.

A survey on the socio-economic profile of internet users (and non-users) in Bangladesh (Alliance for Affordable Internet (A4AI) and Access to Information (a2i) Programme, 2020) provides us with some interesting facts. The share of internet users is a little above 43 per cent—while about 55 per cent of those who live in urban areas use the internet, which is 35 per cent for rural residents (Table 2.8). Further, if more than 53 per cent of men use internet, the corresponding number for women is only 34 per cent.

Use of the internet in Bangladesh peaks at the 16-24 years age group recording about 81 per cent (Table 2.8). This share secularly decreases across the higher age group. This age group trend largely corresponds with the trend depicted by the users’ educational status. The share of users is much higher among those who are pursuing education, e.g., about 72 per cent of them are engaged at the secondary education level, and 89.5 per cent of them are pursuing higher education. Indeed, more than 70 per cent of those who have completed higher education continue to use the internet.

While we locate a direct association between education status and internet use, it is a matter of critical policy and practical relevance to find out further details of those who are pursuing education without the advantage of having access to the internet. These figures are about 28 per cent at the secondary

Table 8: Profile of internet users and non-users in Bangladesh by location, gender, age group and qualification (%)

Profile Indicator	User	Non-User
Location		
Urban	54.8	45.2
Rural	34.8	65.2
Gender		
Male	53.2	46.8
Female	34.2	65.8
Age Group		
16-24 years	80.7	19.3
25-34 years	56.3	43.8
35-44 years	29.3	70.7
45-60 years	15.3	84.7
60+ years	2.7	97.3
Educational Qualification		
Primary (continuing)	16.2	83.8
Primary (completed)	20.8	79.2
Secondary (continuing)	71.9	28.1
Secondary (completed)	48.5	51.5
Higher Secondary (continuing)	89.5	10.5
Higher Secondary (completed)	70.2	29.8
No Formal Education	6.0	94.0
Total	43.1	56.9

Source: Bangladesh National ICT Household Survey (2018-19).

level and 10.5 per cent at the higher secondary level. No less important is the fact that 94 per cent of the people with no formal education are internet non-user. This indicates access to education being the single most important discriminating factor in the case of access to the internet or the reverse. One wonders which way the causality runs.

Whatsoever, the mentioned survey reveals that internet users in Bangladesh are most likely to be young men (predominantly in the 16-34 years age group) living in urban areas. They also tend to be higher educated than non-users. Does this revealed profile imply that a significant part of the so-called disengaged young people is predominantly less educated women living in rural areas? The survey further indicates that the major reasons mentioned by the female respondents for not using the internet included “no permission to use internet” (95.4 per cent), “security issues” (95.4 per cent), and “cultural reasons” (90.1 per cent). These figures show the critically disadvantaged position of a certain section of female citizens in Bangladesh when it comes to digital access.

The foregoing analyses suggest that while the country has come a long way in terms of making policy and provisions for education, jobs and internet access, the inclusive nature of such efforts remains far from ideal. It is maintained that these “cracks in inclusivity” affecting the youth population in a hard way may have widened further during the pandemic. We explore these issues in the subsequent sections.

3. IMPACT IN THE AREA OF DIGITAL ACCESS

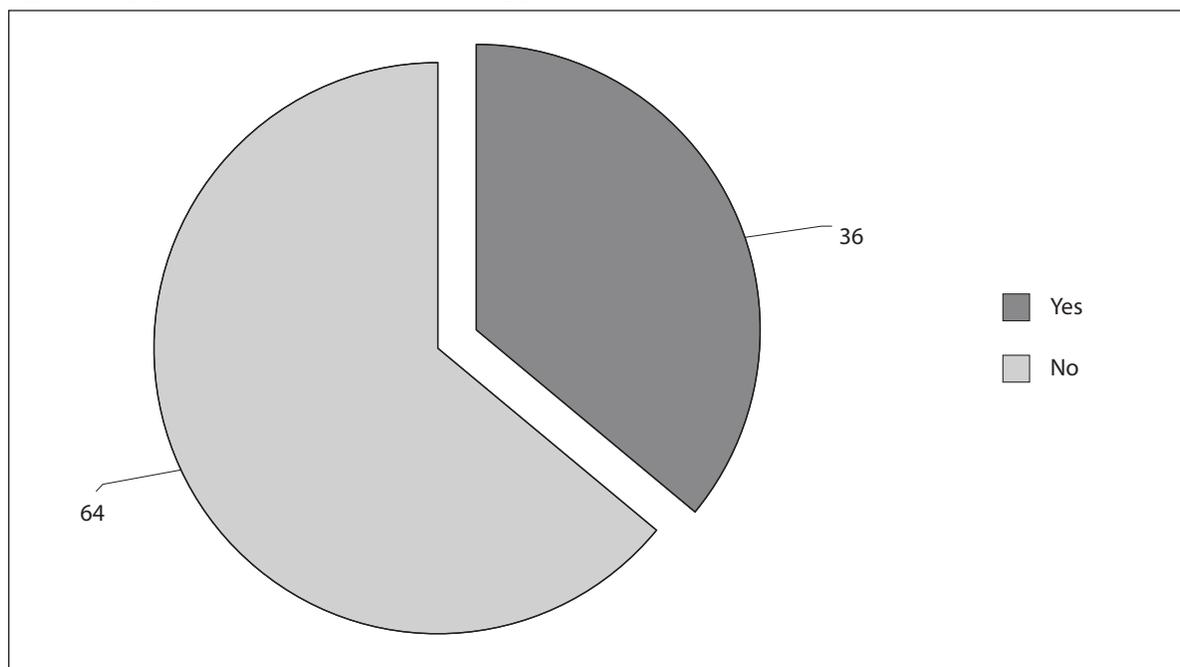
Technological advancement is considered one of the most critical elements of a country's progress where digital access, usage of digital platforms, and diffusion of technology all through the country act as the primary three considerations (Waughen, 2015). Technological advancement in Bangladesh has previously been jeopardised due to limited access to digital platforms at all levels in the country. The inaccessibility created a "digital divide" among youths in the country while this divide has further widened in the last one year due to the pandemic. The present section picks up some of such marginalisations of discriminatory phenomenon.

Access to technology can be explained in terms of three of its distinctive features; viz. access to technology, content, and future innovation of the technologies (Dutta & Lanvin, 2019). According to the Global Information Technology Report (2016), Bangladesh was in the 112th position, deterioration from its previous 109 in 2015 (World Economic Forum, 2016). Indeed, Bangladesh lags behind the other South Asian countries except for Nepal (Baller, Battista, Dutta, & Lanvin, 2016), notwithstanding the country's promise to build a "Digital Bangladesh". Bangladesh has been relatively underprepared in the area of digital access due to the current pandemic situation. While weak performance in network readiness for Bangladesh is a pre-existing structural issue, this handicap created a hindrance in dealing with the COVID-19. Under the circumstances where the new situation has enhanced dependency on digital platforms and online access creating a "new normal", not only the negative implications of the "old issues" got worse, but the pre-existing problems gave rise to new ones.

Since the beginning of the pandemic, many employment and services opted for digital platforms to minimise the transmission risks of the virus. Because of the required digitisation of the services, many marginalised youths were pushed further behind due to their inaccessibility to these digital platforms. This section particularly focuses on the general pre-existing issues of digital access such as low awareness, poor skills and lack of devices, as well as poor connectivity, and how the overall digital access situation aggravated during the pandemic. This new COVID situation was predicated by the limited access to smart gadgets, high cost of internet access, weak internet speed and unstable electricity supply.

3.1 New issues after the pandemic

Since March 2020, the education system in Bangladesh has been fully converted into an online education system. Evidence emerging from the survey carried out by the Platform reported that many students do not have smartphones or devices to connect online, while school teachers are also not properly equipped and trained to conduct online classes. Additionally, internet services are reported to be costly for students belonging to lower-income households, and the quality of the broadband internet connection is pretty poor. As students and different types of service holders attend their study and work from home, frequent load-shedding and electricity cuts have been mentioned as a major accessibility problem, particularly during the general holidays. Apart from the old issues concerning digital access that existed before COVID-19, these newly induced issues relating to the use of digital platforms have affected the overall access situation amidst the pandemic.

Figure 1: Engagement in online education/training platforms

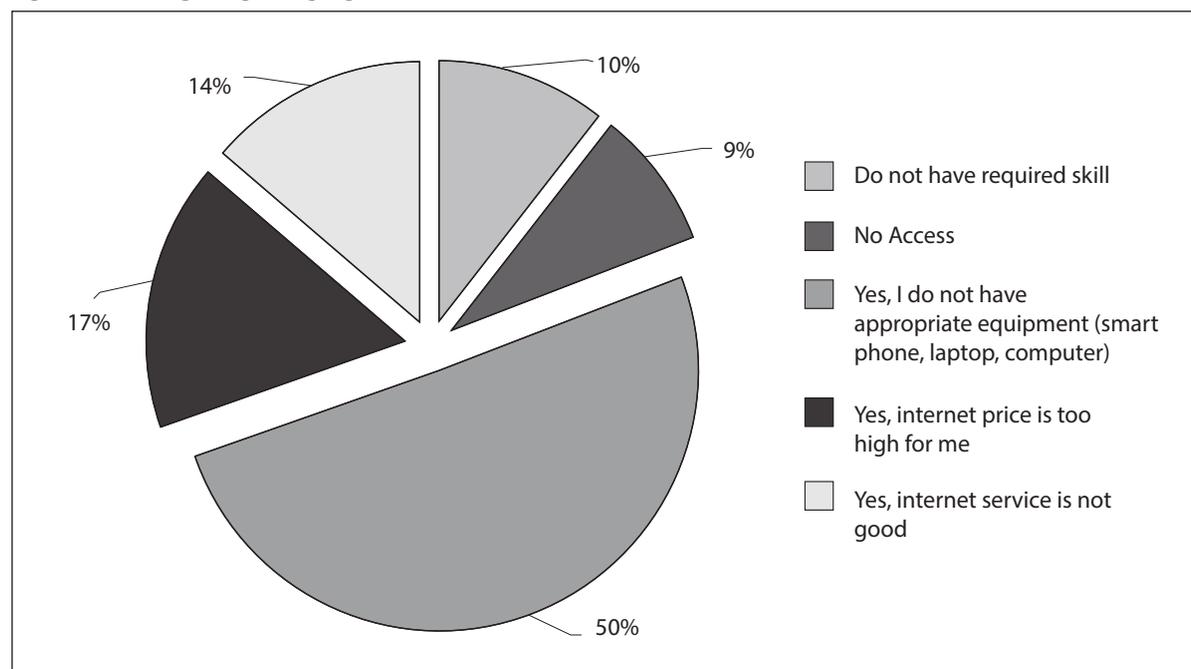
Source: Citizen's Platform's Youth Survey 2020.

Access to training programmes: There is a strong link between educational attainment and ICT use, which means that regardless of the socio-economic and demographic variables such as wealth, location, age and gender, higher education levels are associated with an enhanced likelihood of using ICT skills (UNICEF, 2019). In Bangladesh, most training facilities are found to be in very poor conditions compared to the national-level good quality training institutes. Implications of this old problem regarding the poor quality of training programmes in the country reappeared with vergerence during the pandemic. It has been further pointed out that access to ICT-based education is almost absent for the youths from disadvantaged communities such as Dalits, plainland Adivasi and urban slum-dwellers. Even if available, the quality of such services happens to be very poor (Moazzem & Shibly, 2020).

According to the survey conducted under this study, 64 per cent of the respondents were not involved in any online education or training programme during the pandemic (Figure 3.1). 36 per cent of the respondents who are only studying reported that they were not engaged in any online education or training programme. Lack of appropriate equipment, high price and bad quality of internet services has been mentioned as the main reasons behind their low participation in online education and training programmes. Another 15 per cent of the respondents opined that the quality of the online education services is not up to the mark.

Access to online platforms: At the dialogue organised by the Citizen's Platform, several youth participants—representing the left-behind groups such as Dalit, ethnic minorities and indigenous group people and persons with disabilities—informed that their access to digital platforms is very limited. A representative from the group of persons with disabilities stated that accessing technology is challenging for physically challenged people since they need special technological support to address their special needs. As a result, among others, these youths remain uninformed about job circulars and other relevant negotiations. The ongoing pandemic has put, among others, the youths

Figure 2: Challenges regarding digital access



Source: Citizen's Platform's Youth Survey 2020.

with disabilities in a further disadvantageous position. Participants from the Dalit community and ethnic minority groups expressed their concerns about accessing online platforms as they do not have the necessary devices, including smartphones.

Limited availability of necessary equipment: Incidentally, half of the respondents of the survey conducted by the Platform informed that they do not have appropriate equipment such as smartphones, laptops and computers, to access digital platforms (see Figure 3.2). Compared to the situation of the respondents in Dhaka and other cities, respondents from rural areas are more prone to digital access related challenges such as lack of equipment, low quality of internet connection, and high price for internet services. About 60 per cent of the respondents from the rural areas reported that they do not have the appropriate equipment to access internet. The comparable share was much lower in urban cities (Table 3.1). More than half of the respondents looking for jobs reported that they did not have the appropriate equipment for internet access. Moreover, one-third of youth respondents who were only studying also informed that they do not have the appropriate equipment (see Table 3.1).

Table 9: Digital access by rural and urban areas (%)

Particulars	Dhaka city	Other cities	Rural
Do not have required skill	8	6	12
No access	24	13	5
Do not have appropriate equipment (smart phone, laptop, computer)	26	29	60
Internet price is too high for me	12	29	15
Internet service is not good	31	24	8

Source: Citizen's Platform's Youth Survey 2020.

Rural-urban divide regarding accessibility: The rural-urban divide in the case of digital access comes out quite directly from the figures presented in Table 4.1. It is noteworthy that the general availability of internet connection is not so much an issue in rural areas or in cities in comparison to the situation in Dhaka. It is the absence of appropriate equipment and devices, lack of required skills and high cost of internet services that constrain the use of digital platforms by the rural and city (other than the capital) dwellers. Curiously, it seems that the accessibility of internet service is most challenging for young users living in the district towns.

From the survey conducted under this study, it can be found that more than 80 per cent of the respondents have digital access with varying levels of difficulties, including the absence of smart devices and equipment, poor internet connection and costly internet services. On the other hand, almost 20 per cent of the respondents indicated that they do not have any access to digital platforms due to absence of the required skills and digital literacy to do so.

Digital access and current status: Table 3.2 presents the availability of digital access by the status of the youths during the pandemic. More than half of the young respondents do not have the necessary equipment or devices to make the best use of internet services. This factor is particularly constraining for those looking for jobs (57 per cent). Another important factor inhibiting the use of digital services by the youths relate to the exorbitant unit price of internet services. It goes without saying that young people coming from families with depressed incomes will hardly be able to afford these expensive gadgets as well as the high prices of internet connections. During the pandemic period, they are ending up being much more excluded from the public services as well as from market information.

Table 10: Relation between digital access and current status of youth (%)

Particulars	Looking for job	Studying/ training and working	Studying/ training only	Working only
Do not have required skill	7	4	6	16
No access	5	7	10	12
Do not have appropriate equipment (smart phone, laptop, computer)	57	54	36	50
Internet price is too high	20	17	28	9
Internet service is not good	11	18	19	13

Source: Citizen's Platform's Youth Survey 2020.

3.2 Poor foundations for skill development

Poor quality of basic education in Bangladesh poses considerable challenges for the development of technical and information and communications technology (ICT) skills (World Bank, 2018).⁸ This is also one of the pre-existing critical vulnerabilities, particularly affecting the youths from disadvantaged families. Due to the lack of quality education at both primary and secondary levels, foundational skills for job-relevant technical literacy often remain inadequate for those enrolling in post-secondary education. It also creates a barrier to attaining qualifications and required skills to be

⁸World Development Report (2018) highlights that the 21st century skills work best in conjunction with solid foundational skills, higher-order cognitive skills and technical skills.

prepared for the job market. The participants of the dialogue highlighted that recent graduates are facing employment challenges due to a lack of experience and technical skills. Almost 9 per cent of the survey respondents reported that they were facing difficulties finding jobs amid this pandemic even after completing their graduation.

The pandemic has scaled up many times the importance of digital access, particularly for the youths. The heightened demand for internet services due to the pandemic has explicitly exposed the structural flaws of digital services in Bangladesh. The structural inadequacy, in turn, is disproportionately affecting the young people coming from disadvantaged families with depressed income. The pandemic has also further deepened the digital divide leading to greater alienation of the youths. Therefore, the post-COVID recovery plan must include the improvement of the internet backbone of the country as well as the competitive pricing of its services. No less important will be devising a public policy intervention to improve the acquisition of necessary equipment by the youths from disadvantaged families.

4. IMPACT ON ACCESS TO EMPLOYMENT

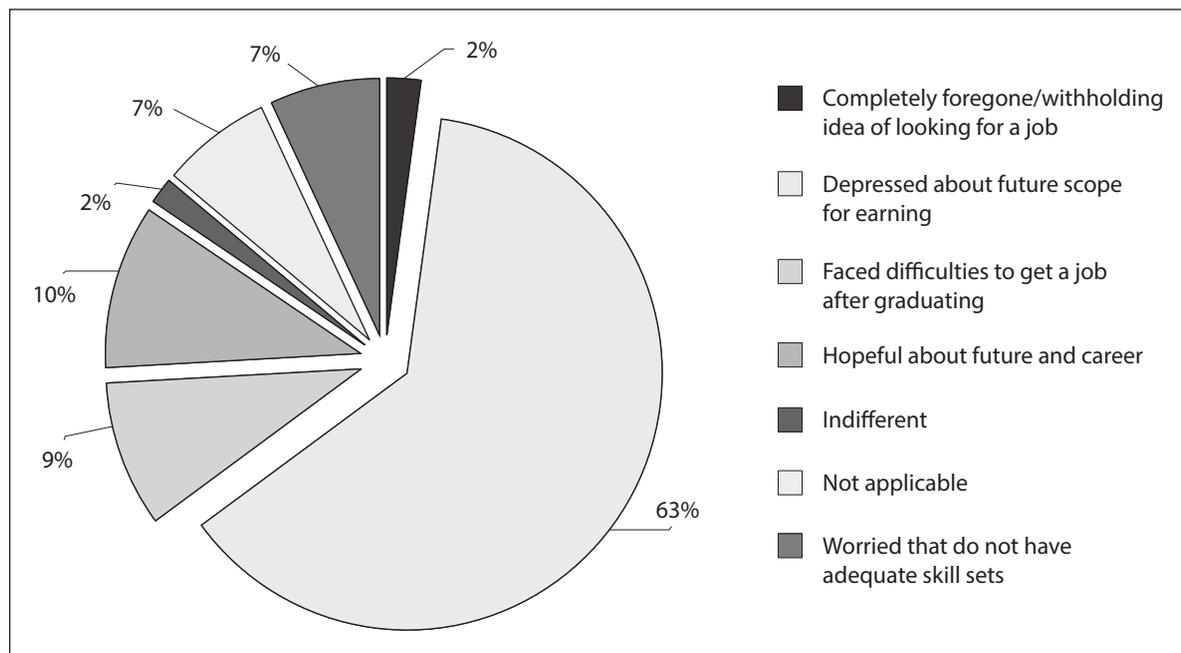
Employment creation is an immense challenge for Bangladesh, and the labour market of Bangladesh has been struggling to absorb the increasing number of job-seeking youths. The ongoing pandemic has made Bangladesh's unemployment scenario even more demanding as earning sources of around 50 million people working in the informal sector have been negatively affected (Akter, 2020). Moreover, massive job losses may occur in both formal sectors, not only due to shrinking opportunities in the export-oriented apparel sector, where a large number of young women are engaged (CPD, 2020). Although the number of workers moving overseas remains robust, a significant number of migrant workers have returned to Bangladesh and their future job prospects—within the country or overseas—remain uncertain.

4.1 Effectiveness of skills supply and poor employability

Low labour productivity, basically due to poor foundational skills, is a longstanding issue for Bangladesh, and this directly impacts the employability of the youths. World Bank (2018) has identified a number of issues that put significant constraints on the youth's productivity in the country, leading to a considerable level of skill gaps for them. These issues include low educational attainment (despite an expansion of access to education in recent years), poor perception towards technology and inaccessibility of skills training. All these traditional issues inhibiting the employment prospects of young people, making them less prepared to deal with the job markets conditions, has been aggravated during the pandemic. Because of the economic slowdown caused by the pandemic, fresh graduates are finding the employment opportunities to have diminished significantly, while the salary and the wages have also downgraded.

In this context, the present study explores the perceptions of the youths regarding their future job prospects. The survey revealed that about 63 per cent of the overall youth respondents are quite negatively disposed towards the future scope for earning (Figure 4.1). The corresponding figures for rural areas is higher (67 per cent) compared to that in the urban areas (53 per cent). Only 10 per cent of the respondents are hopeful about the future and their careers. Such a depressing attitude towards career prospects is going to have multiple negative spillover effects among the youths in Bangladesh.

Figure 3: Perception towards future career prospects during COVID-19



Source: Citizen's Platform's Youth Survey 2020.

This uncertainty about gainful engagement in the future puts the youth cohort into mental depression. Almost 96 per cent of the survey respondents reported suffering from a varied level of mental stress as they remain concerned about their education, future earning, health and many other related issues (e.g., taking care of parents).

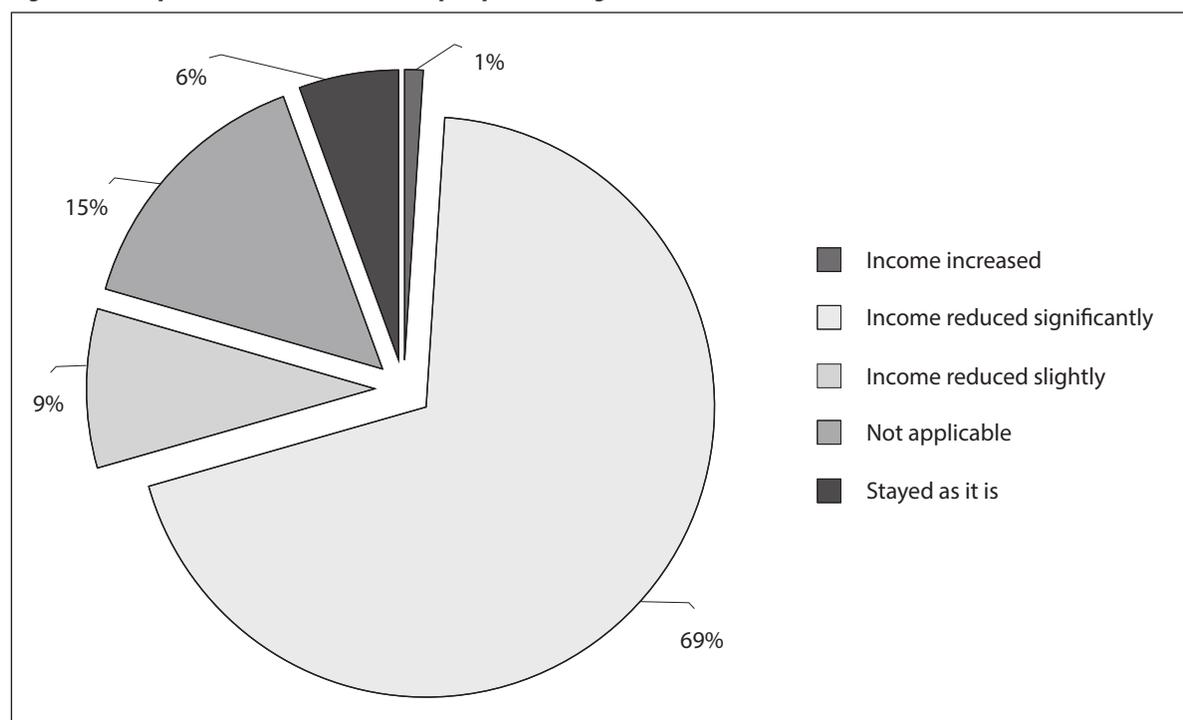
4.2 Increased informalisation of jobs for youths

The global economy in 2020 has been reeling under the pandemic, and job markets, particularly its informal component, have been affected the most. Workers in the informal sector lost 60 per cent of their incomes within the first month of the pandemic (ILO, 2020). A staggering 80 per cent of the labour force in Bangladesh is employed in the informal economy and contributes to around 43 per cent of the country's GDP⁹. Incidentally, more than 89 per cent of the youth labour force is engaged in the informal labour market. Moreover, the female employment rate in the informal sector is much higher than that of the male counterpart (91.6 per cent). These rates concerning youth and women are likely to worsen due to economic fallouts of the pandemic. Further, it is expected that the wages are going to fall under the circumstances. Many employees of the hardest-hit formal sectors, such as the RMG and services industries, may get pushed into informality to sustain their livelihood.

According to LFS 2016-17 data, the difference between the formal and informal setting of employment in all the sub-sectors is striking. For example, in the agriculture sector, the informal employment rate is 38.7 per cent, while the formal employment rate is merely less than 2 per cent of the total employment in Bangladesh. The same trend can be found in the services and industry sector as well. This disparity between formal and informal employment rates in sub-sectors, as well as at the national level, clearly indicates the looming prospect of further informalisation of the employment sector of Bangladesh.

⁹This dependence of GDP on informal sector in Bangladesh is significantly higher than the Asian average (Danish Trade Union Development Agency, 2020).

Figure 4: Perception towards future career prospects during COVID-19



Source: Citizen's Platform's Youth Survey 2020.

In the survey, almost 80 per cent of the young respondents reported that they had experienced an income reduction during this pandemic (Figure 4.2), with nearly 70 per cent reporting "significant income loss". This significant reduction in current income is adversely affecting their self-financed education, and this is particularly true for female students.

At the youth dialogue, a representative of a labour union group of textiles and garment workers informed that due to the pandemic, vast numbers of export orders got cancelled. As a result, almost 300 thousand young workers have lost their jobs¹⁰. As these young workers lack digital skills or internet-related competencies, they are getting "pushed behind" in terms of their alternative employability.

Thus, it is quite obvious that the large informal sector in Bangladesh is set to become even larger. This expansion at the margin will take place through the inclusion of more young workforce, particularly from the female component. The sector will be further characterised by a lack of decent work, including the absence of living wages.

4.3 Vocational education and training, and employment prospects

Despite the increasing demand for a technically proficient workforce in Bangladesh, society in general holds a non-appreciating attitude towards vocational education. Although uptake of skills training has increased in recent years, there exists a huge supply gap in this segment of the job market (e.g., paramedics, plumbers, machine operators etc.). In fact, as many of these skilled workers have gone overseas for work, the supply gap has increased further.

¹⁰It was mentioned that about two-third of the youths in need did not receive any public assistance during the COVID-19 period (Platform Youth Dialogue, 2020).

Several participants at the dialogue highlighted the need for expanding vocational training for youths in view of the growing demand for such skills in different sectors. At the same time, the technical education system has been more adversely affected due to the pandemic as a physical presence to undertake practical work is an essential requirement of this education stream. As may be expected, most of the practical classes cannot be conducted online. A participant at the dialogue, engaged in technical and vocational education, highlighted that a number of his fellow students are looking for short-time or part-time jobs (instead of training continuing with education) to cope with the drop in household income due to the pandemic.

Protecting the young people engaged in technical training and vocational education system have to be promoted to have an alleviating effect on the youth employment.

4.4 Reflection from the survey: Monthly unemployment benefit for the youths

The youths who participated in the survey of the Platform highlighted the need to introduce a monthly unemployment allowance for the young job aspirants in view of the ongoing pandemic. Almost 80 per cent of survey respondents did not get any support from the government during the pandemic despite having severe financial needs. Among these respondents, 71 per cent recommended a monthly unemployment allowance amounting to Tk. 5,000. Indeed, almost 80 per cent of respondents, who are currently looking for jobs, also recommended such monthly unemployment benefits (Table 4.1). Even those who currently have jobs expected income support of around Tk. 3,000 plus per month.

Some participants also opined that the allowances for young people linked to skill development programmes might be more impactful than general unemployment benefits. In view of this, a massive skill development programme for the next six months focusing on the youth cohort was recommended. It was maintained that this would make the young workforce appropriately skilled and add substantial value to the national economy. The participants also reckoned that this allowance for skill development to the unemployed youths would follow a virtuous cycle of growth in the economy through increased consumption and increasing productivity.

Table 11: Share of respondents by suggested monthly unemployment allowance (%)

Particulars	Tk. 1000	Tk. 2000	Tk. 3000	Tk. 5000
Looking for job	1	3	16	79
Not in education/training, not working, not looking for job	6	6	14	75
Studying/training and working	1	10	30	60
Studying/training only	4	12	31	53
Working only	0.2	2	25	72

Source: Citizen's Platform's Youth Survey 2020.

Accordingly, the issue concerning the introduction of a "youth allowance" for the new entrants into the job market received high attention on behalf of the core stakeholder. It will be worthwhile to explore the fiscal and institutional aspects of such a programme (even in a pilot form) as a part of the post-pandemic recovery plan.

4.5 Gender dimensions of female employability

It is quite obvious that the female component of the youth population is more likely to disproportionately face the brunt of the pandemic. Following the breakout of the pandemic, female workers have experienced relatively greater job losses, and they are more likely to exit the labour market permanently (Genoni, Khan, Krishnan, Palaniswamy, & Raza, 2020). There are a much fewer number of females enrolled in vocational and technical education. Only 27 per cent of vocational stream secondary students and 14 per cent of polytechnic students were female in 2016 (World Bank, 2018). Moreover, as mentioned earlier, female workers are overwhelmingly engaged in informal and low paid jobs¹¹. This increases their vulnerability through losing their income source and facing lay-offs amidst this pandemic.

This is indicative of the acute vulnerability characterising female employment in Bangladesh as female workers remain at a higher risk of losing their income source during COVID-19.

Indeed, the mentioned gender-related underbelly of female employment concerns the female entrepreneurs too. A female entrepreneur of a beauty parlour at the Platform's dialogue emphasised a significant amount of her income erosion in this sector. Similarly, many businesses are being put at the risk of bankruptcy in this sector. It was also reported that the majority of the employees of this service sector lost their jobs during the pandemic. Another participant, representing the ready-made garment (RMG) workers at the dialogue, informed that pregnant women workers were first to lose their jobs without any prior notice, which pushed them to the edge amidst this pandemic.

The systemic challenges affecting the country's job market for youths became even more constraining during the pandemic. This was characterised by not only significant retrenchment, but also by a fall in wages and increase in informalisation. The female component of the youth labour market was disproportionately affected by these negative trends. Vocational skill development and the introduction of a youth unemployment allowance were recommended as measures to be part of the national economic recovery plan.

5. CONCLUSIONS AND POLICY OUTLOOK

The foregoing analyses discuss the implications of COVID-19 on youth in Bangladesh with reference to three key dimensions: employment, education and digital access. As such, the specific evidence derived from the reviews and the survey results may allow us to make the following observations.

First, the structural challenges which have been lingering since long before the pandemic have only been exacerbated by the scourge. These long-enduring issues comprise the rising rates of unemployment (especially among the educated youths), increasing informalisation of jobs and low secondary education attainment, among many others.

Second, the new vulnerabilities that have arisen as a consequence of COVID-19. Examples of these new forms of vulnerabilities would include the lack of digital infrastructure to support online schooling as well as the absence of necessary digital devices needed to access online resources on the part of the

¹¹Majority of the female workforce continue to be employed in agriculture (63 per cent in 2015). Around 40 per cent of female workers in non-agricultural occupations are absorbed in manufacturing, presumably much to the credit of the RMG sector.

students. Other new issues would include the disruption in education and the loss of part-time jobs for youths.

Third, the observed disproportionate impact of COVID-19 on the youth communities was predicated by the underlying differences reflecting the prevailing disparities in the socio-economic background of the concerned households.

Based on these observations, one can only look forward to the policy framework setting the guidelines to helping vulnerable population groups. There needs to be a dual approach to counteracting the overall deteriorating situation exacerbated by the pandemic. This approach should comprise dealing with the immediate fallout from COVID-19 as well as dealing with lingering structural issues. Looking back on the policy stances outlined in the latest 8FYP, the majority of the policies and programs mentioned explicitly focus on the youth unemployment situation in Bangladesh. Overall, the youth development strategies in the 8FYP fall within two major themes of the labour market; viz., supply-side and demand-side interventions. The supply-side policy interventions call for increased public funding for accessible and quality education and forging partnerships with the private sector to bridge the industry-academia gap. In terms of demand-side policy interventions, the 8FYP encourages self-employment especially through ICT based entrepreneurship through dedicated entrepreneurial training, ensuring ease of access to credit and reduced taxation on ICT services. However, as the data collected has shown, domestic employment has been insufficient in dealing with these structural issues despite there being a planned target ratio of domestic to overseas employment at 70 to 30 per cent. Given this, local efforts of ameliorating the youth employment situation are not enough.

There are numerous government-established youth relevant initiatives, one of the most notable being the National Youth Action Plan (NYAP) guiding the National Youth Policy 2017 (NYP2017). The interventions under the NYP2017 focus on inclusive youth development through their self-growth, education and employment. Additionally, it delves further into youth involvement in nation-building and sustainable development.

Other initiatives include the National Service Programme providing training and temporary employment to trainees upon completion of programme for up to two years. While the 8FYP highlights the importance of the National Skills Development Policy (NSDP) 2011 to improving the country's TVET system and increasing employment among the youth, the latest NSDP 2020 has evolved to include skills training focused on the 4th industrial revolution and climate change.

Additionally, there are other national programmes and projects targeting youths in Bangladesh such as the "Skills and Training Enhancement Project (STEP)", "Bangladesh Skills for Employment and Productivity (B-SEP) project", "Global Jobs Pact of the International Labour Organisation" and the "Skills for Employment Investment Programme (SEIP)." These projects have contributed billions of taka to public and private institutions to provide technical skills training, internships, and increasing employability, especially among the poorest of youths in Bangladesh.

Despite the numerous institutions, policies and programmes in place furthering youth development and focused on youth education and employment, there are still many issues that lay within. Some of such issues are highlighted below:

Integrating the youth dynamics in implementing SDGs

Without bringing the youth into the mainstream development process, SDGs cannot be attained in the country. In this context, several priorities were identified during the dialogue, including bridging the skills gap and ensuring access to finance to the youth. The dialogue participants also urged to address the rural-urban and gender gap among the country's young population.

Emphasising youth voices and youth-led accountability processes

Coordination at the national level is required for targeting the population in need since resources are scarce. The youth need a platform to raise their voices from the local level to the parliament. Participation of the youth in the local and national level decision-making should be formally facilitated and enforced. As of yet, there are no comprehensive details outlining the extent of youth participation in the 2017 and 2020 Voluntary National Review (VNR) despite highlighting the importance of youth voices in the country's development process. On a local level, there has been a single youth-led Voluntary Local Review (VLR) initiative undertaken by ActionAid Bangladesh in partnership with four local NGOs across four districts in the country.¹² This VLR spanned four months from August to November 2020 in Dhaka, Chittagong, Nilphamari and Bagerhat. While there were several indicators on track, such as Under-5 and child mortality, there were areas of contention. These areas, primarily, comprised the lack of equal pay for equal work, rising number of local conflict incidences and lack of inclusivity of opportunities in local or national decision-making levels for the youth.

Protecting the left-behind groups

Access to education had come up as the primary concern for the third gender society at the dialogue. To ensure education for this youth group, the government and NGOs should establish separate educational institutions and seamless online education for them. However, access to digital platforms is very limited for these left-behind groups, including Dalit, ethnic minorities and indigenous group people, third gender community and persons with disabilities. As mentioned earlier, nearly 89 per cent of the youth labour force is employed informally, and as initial statistics have revealed, informal workers lost nearly 60 per cent of their incomes within the first month of the pandemic. (ILO, 2020)

Special attention to the accessibility of these left-behind groups to digital platforms is very much needed to engage them in the post-COVID inclusive development agenda. Participants from the Dalit community and ethnic minority groups also expressed their concerns about inadequate gadgets and access to online platforms.

It was also reflected in the youth dialogue organised by the Citizen's Platform that existing students are the most affected due to the pandemic, especially the public university students. As there is no adequate database about the students studying at the public universities, it is often difficult to monitor the dropped-out students from the tertiary level. The dialogue participants suggested that these dropped-out students need to return to the workforce with renewed skills. Learning a third language like Japanese, Korean can be an additional skill of the students, which can contribute to their future

¹²This local experience of integrating youth in the SDG accountability processes was brought to light in a virtual dialogue conducted by Citizen's Platform for SDGs, Bangladesh. See for details <https://bdplatform4sdgs.net/youth-voice-is-missing-in-policy-process/>

employability. Moreover, the dialogue participants expressed that vocational education should be brought to the mainstream development focus to facilitate the left-behind groups.

Partnership with the non-state actors

The dialogue highlighted that a comprehensive partnership between government and non-state actors is needed to establish skill development programmes for youth. The dialogue participants expressed that non-state actors can play a crucial role in building skilled labour. The pandemic has provided an epoch of concentration in the healthcare sector. Through developing skills in different health programmes, the youth may be engaged in this sector. Care workers are also needed worldwide to provide one to one support to elderly people in different countries of the world. The dialogue participants believed that non-state actors could facilitate by collaborating with the government regarding youth development.

Against the backdrop of accentuation of the prevailing challenges and emergence of new issues, combined with the inadequacy of policies and programmes targeting youths in Bangladesh, the immediate actions suggested in this paper exclusively focus on support for youths in the forms of stimulus packages, financial inclusion, participation in the decision-making process, the introduction of a monthly unemployment benefit and a database for unemployed youths. The recommendations also cover the broad area of partnership building of youths with non-state actors. The focus areas are discussed below in detail.

Creating Database for Unemployed, Vulnerable and Disengaged Youth

Oftentimes, surveys and studies do not acknowledge the heterogeneity within the youth population across Bangladesh. Ergo, national policies and programs are found to treat the youth as a single homogenous group; Completely disregarding disabled or minority youth groups or youths who have been alienated due to the burgeoning digital divide or even youths who have fallen prey to drugs, mental stress and extremism. These youth groups are often left out of mainstream youth development discourses and, as a result, form part of the growing population of 'disengaged' youth.

If the disengaged youth are to be holistically targeted, it will have to begin with a formal acknowledgement of their presence within a dedicated 'youth database'. The timely collection and dissemination of specific and youth-relevant data will allow for adequate policy targeting and monitoring. A 'youth database' will also allow us to address the specific challenges of the physically challenged, indigenous groups, youths living in remote areas, unemployed youths and young women. The majority of the survey respondents also recommended a public agency registering a list of unemployed youth forces in a specific public database to easily reach unemployed and vulnerable youths.

Reaching out to the disengaged youth

As previously mentioned, the numerous institutions and respective youth-focused policies treat the youth as a homogenous group. The survey findings and during the dialogue organised by the Citizen's Platform clearly highlight that the youth group is very much diverse. The overall negative impact led by the pandemic has disproportionately impacted the youth community, wherein youths from disadvantaged households are found to suffer the most in terms of unemployment and disruption in education. As such, 'disengaged' youth need to be catered to especially and not as a part of a larger,

homogenous youth community. This ties in with creating and maintaining a comprehensive public database focused solely on the various groups of youth.

Introducing the 'Allowance for Unemployed Youth'

Records state that more than 50 per cent of the national population are youths who are experiencing an exacerbation of previously increasing rates of unemployment during the pandemic, especially among the educated youths. Using the aforementioned 'youth' database in conjunction with either a registration process of unemployed youths through a separate public agency or through self-registration will help facilitate the next step. Given this context, the immediate next step comprises economically empowering the youths through an 'allowance for unemployed youths'.

This study brought out the underlying concerns and youth experience at grass root level regarding the three pressing issues for youth development in Bangladesh. Access to education was hampered in multiple ways where inadequacy of proper equipment and devices, inaccessibility of internet services and lack of digital literacy were identified as the main obstacles for disengaged youths to participate in online education and training platforms during this pandemic. The impact of COVID-19 was amplified in the case of access to employment for youths. They suffered the most due to increased informality of jobs for youth, lesser marketability of their skills and lesser participation in vocational training, making them more vulnerable to COVID induced employment shock. The enormity of the digital divide among young people during the pandemic again indicated the disparity between engaged and disengaged youths. Reintegration of disengaged youths into the youth recovery agenda through public policy implications is the crying need in a post-pandemic world.

In this cue, the policy implications must reflect an inclusive support system for youth where inclusion of youths in decision-making can be established. This inclusive support system has to facilitate the youth with a monthly unemployment benefit, better access to stimulus packages, and protect those at high risk of being left behind. In this context, the formation of a database to register these left behind and pushed behind youths is a timely initiative to reintegrate them into youth recovery.

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ANNEXES

Annex 1: Youth-related studies, dialogues and meetings carried out by the Citizen's Platform

1. Webinar on *The COVID-19 Discourse: Are We Asking the Right Question?* (Tuesday, 03 November 2020)
2. Webinar on COVID-19 and Bangladesh: A Youth Agenda for Socio-Economic Recovery. (Sunday, 01 November 2020)
3. Citizen's Platform for SDGs, Bangladesh. (October, 2020). *Voluntary National Review 2020 and Youth Perspectives*. Briefing note no. 5.
4. Virtual dialogue on *Voluntary National Review 2020 and Youth Perspectives*, partnered with The Daily Star and Plan International. (Monday, 20 July 2020)
5. Conference on *Voluntary National Review (VNR) 2020 of Bangladesh: Positioning Non-State Actors*. (Wednesday, 11 March 2020)
6. Workshop on Youth Employment and Effectiveness of Public Service. (2 August 2019)
7. Youth Conference: Bangladesh and Agenda 2030- Aspirations of the Youth. (14 October 2018)
8. Youth Conference 2018: Agenda 2030–Aspirations of the Youth. (14 October 2018)

Annex 2: List of selected Youth Organisations, Platforms and Initiatives

Sl. No.	Youth Organisations, Platforms and Initiatives
1	United Nations Youth and Students Association of Bangladesh (UNYSAB)
2	Youth Policy Forum
3	Youth Foundation of Bangladesh (YFB)
4	Youth Opportunities
5	Ignite Youth Foundation
6	Young Power in Social Action (YPSA)
7	SDG Youth Forum
8	National Youth Forum of Bangladesh – NYFB
9	Bangladesh Youth Environmental Initiative (BYEI)
10	Barisal Youth Society (BYS)
11	JAAGO Foundation
12	One Degree Initiative Foundation
13	Bangladesh Ideal Youth Development Centre (BIYDC) - Chapainababganj
14	Bangladesh Ignight Youth Society (BIYS) – Chapainababganj
15	Bangladesh Youth Enterprise Advice and Help Center
16	Bangladesh Youth First Concerns (BYFC)
17	Bekar Youth Helping through Alternative & Nurtured Development (BY HAND) - Jamalpur
18	Development Association for Youth
19	Forum for Rehabilitation & Integrated Dev. Approach by the Youth - Tangail
20	Khasdobir Youth Action Group - Sylhet
21	Rehabilitation Employment & Development for the Youth (READY) – Bagerhat

(Annex 2 contd.)

(Annex 2 contd.)

Sl. No.	Youth Organisations, Platforms and Initiatives
22	World Assembly of Muslim Youths
23	Youth Action for Social Advancement (YASA)
24	Youth Initiative for Socio Economic Activities (YISEA)
25	Youth Engagement & Support (YES); programme of Transparency International Bangladesh (TIB)
26	Volunteer for Bangladesh (VBD); programme of JAAGO Foundation
27	Global Platform Bangladesh; a platform of ActionAid
28	Youth Ending Hunger (YEH); a programme of The Hunger Project-Bangladesh
29	The BYLC Graduate Network (BGN); a platform of Bangladesh Youth Leadership Center (BYLC)
30	Young Change Makers Coalition - YCMC in Bangladesh; a combined platform of Plan International, Youth For Change's Bangladesh country panel, SERAC-Bangladesh, World Vision, NCTF, Sight Savers, Youth Alliance International, SNV-Bangladesh and Leaping Boundaries
31	Youth for Change; a programme of Plan International
32	Empower Youth for Work; a programme of Oxfam Bangladesh
33	National Youth Council; a joint platform of Department of Youth Development of Bangladesh Government and Oxfam Bangladesh
34	Bangladesh Debating Council – BDC
35	Bangladesh Debate Federation (BDF)
36	National Debate Federation Bangladesh
37	Debate for Humanity – DFH
38	Debate for Democracy
39	BDCyclists
40	Aamrai Bangladesh
41	KIN – A Voluntary Organization of SUST
42	Kolloi Foundation, Natore

Annex 3: Design of Platform's youth survey

Citizen's Platform for SDGs, Bangladesh undertook a survey to assess the impacts of COVID-19 on youths and bring out the major concerns in the context of the pandemic. The survey respondents were self-selected, and thus, the sample is not nationally representative. The survey was conducted online during 18-27 October 2020.

Five different age groups participated in the survey, where an overwhelming majority of the respondents (85 per cent) represented the youth groups drawn from 18-30 years age bracket. The survey was participated by a total of 1,163 respondents, among which 74 per cent were male, and 26 per cent were female respondents.

More than two-thirds of the respondents (70 per cent) were from rural areas. Almost one-third (30 per cent) of the respondents were from Dhaka and other cities. About 20 per cent of the respondents were from marginalised groups, i.e., Dalit, Adivasi and persons with disabilities.

To validate the findings of the survey, the *Citizen's Platform* organised a virtual dialogue titled "COVID-19 and Bangladesh: A Youth Agenda for Socio-Economic Recovery" on 1 November 2020.

The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic continues to wreak havoc across Bangladesh and its youths have been affected with no exception. Making up more than a third of Bangladesh's population, the youths experience both exacerbation of pre-existing vulnerabilities and a set of new challenges in view of the pandemic. The study highlights the concerns of the youth community in Bangladesh in the areas of education, employment and digital access during the pandemic. The paper finds that 'cracks in inclusivity' in youth education and employment targeting interventions and the digital divide, resulting from structural inadequacies in the digital infrastructure of Bangladesh, have only widened and disproportionately impacted youths from disadvantaged households during COVID-19. The paper reviews the existing institutions, policies, and programmes concerning the youth in the backdrop of the pandemic and emphasises the need to integrate the youth in the implementation of SDGs and protect left-behind youths. The recommendations highlight the need to create and maintain a record of 'vulnerable and disengaged' youths in order to use this to reach out to the vulnerable youth, facilitate youth-led accountability processes and emphasise youth voices in the policymaking process. The paper urges to introduce an 'allowance for unemployed youths' in Bangladesh.



Citizen's Platform for SDGs, Bangladesh

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