

| SPOTLIGHT |

EMPLOYING OUR BURGEONING YOUTH POPULATION

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Not even in her worst nightmares did 27-year-old Hena Akter think there would come a day when she could no longer afford food. And yet, after completing her Master's degree from Eden College in 2015, she was unable to get a job and found herself in exactly that situation—starving. "You cannot imagine how it feels to starve in spite of having a Master's. You cannot even share what you are going through with your family, friends, or well-wishers," Hena sighs.

Leaving the dormitory, Hena took a room with five roommates and started attending a coaching centre to prepare for the Bangladesh Civil Service (BCS) exam. She sat for both the 36th and 37th BCS exams; attended more than 20 government job interviews in different ministries, directorates, primary schools and projects; and spent thousands of takas in exam fees, but to no avail—she could not secure a job. For Hena, who had always had an excellent academic record, this was traumatising beyond words.

To make matters worse, her father passed away with liver cirrhosis at the end of the same year. Hena's family's financial condition worsened, and they could no longer pay for her coaching. She was compelled to discontinue her preparations for a government job. Instead, she started applying to private companies and non-profit organisations.

"I used to keep 'Chakrir Potrika' (job magazine) every week and apply to every possible circular, but the employers never called. My roommates told me to be patient as I had no prior work experience. I waited day after day, but nothing was happening," says Hena.

Hena pauses for a moment and continues, "I would often contemplate how to make use of my seven years' worth of expertise in Islamic History and Culture to feed myself. I did not have any contacts in Dhaka who could arrange a job for me, but I got so desperate, I started asking whomever I knew to find me some work," she adds.

Since Hena was the eldest daughter in her family, the constant pressure to earn was tearing her apart inside. She could never tell them that she did not have enough money to buy food for herself every day. At one point, she considered committing suicide.

Fortunately, at the start of this year, Hena got herself a job as a field worker at an NGO that works in rural development. She earns 10,000 taka a month, and many of her colleagues only hold a higher secondary school certificate.

According to the latest figures



IMAGE: KAZI TAHsin AGAZ APURBO

released by the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS), around two million youths of working age are unemployed. Like Hena, young university graduates are struggling the most to secure employment. At 12.1 percent, youth unemployment rate at the tertiary level is the highest countrywide. While unemployment rates are naturally higher for young people, given their limited work experience, the double digit unemployment rates in Bangladesh are alarming. Worrying still is that an estimated two million enter the labour force every year, but youth unemployment in Bangladesh has been rising in the past 25 years, from four percent in 1991 to 10.4 percent in 2016 according to the International Labour Organisation (ILO).

However, a significant portion of young people—not reflected in unemployment rates—have given up looking for work altogether because of limited prospects. Today, around 40 percent of this population aged between 15 and 24 years are classified as "not in education, employment or training (NEET)", according to ILO. The actual number adds up to 11.6 million or about one-fifth of the total working age population. ILO's Asia-Pacific Decent Work Decade report states that the NEET rate in Bangladesh is the third worst in the region—behind Maldives (56 percent), a small island wrecked by political turmoil and radicalism; and

Yemen (48 percent), a nation so torn apart by war, famine and cholera that it is often described as "Hell on Earth".

Today, 47.8 percent of the population comprises of youth. Of this, 32.3 million are 15 to 24 year olds, while 46.6 million are under the age of 15. As today's children are tomorrow's young adults, Bangladesh is currently crossing through a demographic window of change. According to Justin Yifu Lin, former World Bank Chief Economist, if the increase in the number of working age individuals can be fully employed in productive activities, the level of average income per capita will increase as a result, and this youth bulge will become what is known as, "demographic dividend." However, if a large cohort of young people cannot find employment and earn satisfactory income, which is what Bangladesh is experiencing, it will become a "demographic bomb," as a large mass of frustrated youth is likely to become a potential source of social and political instability.

The frustrated youth

After graduating approximately at the age of 24 to 25 years, the role a person plays in the family starts to change. He or she needs to start pulling their weight around the house, or in many cases, start their own household. "But if the person cannot secure a job for a long time, she or he starts to feel stressed, which leads to anxiety, frustration, depression, irritability, loss of concentration and

even appetite," says Dr. Mekhala Sarkar, Assistant Professor, National Institute of Mental Health. In most cases, family members become intolerant very quickly and create further pressure to secure a job.

Nure Alam Siddique, Associate Professor at the Department of Institute of Education and Research (IER), University of Dhaka, shed light on high unemployment amongst young university graduates. "We never examine the scope of job opportunity while planning for a specific department, what skills it would teach the students, and how those skills would be helpful for them to manage an appropriate job in this competitive job market. Rather, without considering the reality, we are busy increasing the scope of higher education in an unplanned way—by creating new departments or more specifically, introducing Bachelor's programmes in colleges," he says.

For instance, there are many departments in our universities, such as Political Science, foreign languages, Islamic History and Culture, and Philosophy, which accommodate a larger number of students than there are jobs for. While youth from a comparatively well-off background can try to move and work in developed countries, those from lower and lower-middle class families become the most vulnerable victims in the job market.

Prof. Nehal Karim, from the