

INTERVIEW

# 'We need to foster policy literacy in young people'

In conversation with Farah Kabir, Country Director, ActionAid Bangladesh

MAYABEE ARANNYA

**What has been the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on young people in education?**

There is no one "young people". In this country, we have young people from various backgrounds, rural and urban, as well as varied economic conditions. Many students have tried to earn a livelihood by undertaking tutoring or part-time jobs with the intent to support their educational expenses. In present circumstances, such sources of income are no longer available due to the pandemic and lockdown. University students in particular have been impacted negatively as a result and found it difficult to afford accommodation. Students who were required to support their families using their income from part-time jobs, are struggling to do so, thus families are suffering economically.

Young people are now finding it difficult to continue their education. This is partially due to the digital divide. With the closure of educational institutions, students have experienced multiple challenges and this is manifested in loss of learning and skills development. The impact is not the same for female and male students as the gender discrimination sets in. During the pandemic, female students have mentioned being affected by domestic violence and early marriage. Researchers have

highlighted evidence of the rise in child marriage across the country. These research initiatives were taken by ActionAid and other similar organisations. There is also the issue of mental health and wellbeing. Most of us have, in some way or the other, been affected mentally in the last 18 months due to the loss of loved ones to COVID-19 and uncertainties in all aspects of our lives. Young people in particular have been severely impacted by such uncertainties.

**What could be solutions to these issues plaguing students?**

Online education curriculum in Bangladesh should be reviewed and geared towards practical sessions and applied learning. There is a need for more quality and creative learning. There is also the need for market-oriented skills development to help open up more income-generating opportunities for young people.

I think it is essential that both the government and the private sector design programmes for mental health such as dealing with trauma, depression, anger, etc. Sessions should be available to help young people adapt and learn to co-exist with COVID-19. Online exercise, yoga, singing, art and overall creative sessions should also be encouraged to help deal with mental health issues.

We should create space for young people to discuss their issues and



Farah Kabir.

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rights, and engage in advocacy and campaigning. That would require them to apply their minds and engage with a cause. Issues like climate justice, gender discrimination, lack of inclusion etc., could be causes that we can work on with young people.

Lastly, we need stimulus packages for young people. These should be targeted packages for students so that they can continue education and also contribute financially to the family.

**How can more young people be mobilised to fight for important causes?**

We must listen to young people about

their issues. We know the generic problems, but discussion should be contextualised according to the grounded realities of the young people so as to develop plans and allocate resources accordingly. If one is living in a village, Upazila or Union, the issues may be different from those living in urban spaces. If we mobilise young people to take up the issues, they can relate to it and be passionate about it.

The challenge lies in organising because we have reached a state where we feel that nothing works. To combat this, we need to put out more positive stories. The media can talk about the successes of initiatives taken at the local or national level.

There are also many generic issues where young people can mobilise other young people, such as skills development, employment opportunities, gender-based violence, safe cities, etc. If these issues are part of national or local campaigns, many young people can be mobilised.

**How can the youth be empowered to become decision-makers within our policy framework?**

Platforms can be created by both the government and non-government actors where young people can participate meaningfully. It could even be informal discussions where they can come and speak without fear of judgement. The government now puts

policy documents online and asks for comments. Young people who are digitally savvy and understand policies need to be alert and ensure that they contribute.

We need to foster policy literacy in young people. Although they can voice their opinions, they perhaps can't speak in the policy language. We can help them share their concerns and solutions they think would be effective and package them for policymakers. First, we need to take some policies that impact young people and unpack and demystify them. Young people who are policy literate should then take the simplified policies to the relevant young people, get their ideas and bring them back to us. It's a two-way process.

One question that arises is, once you have learned and understood the policy and developed a view about it, who do you speak to? We can use organisations like ours to bring together different actors and facilitate. The media can play a role by doing features and webinars where these issues are reflected and spoken on. We have already facilitated direct conversations between policymakers, legislators and young people and found that some aspects of the young peoples' opinions are reflected in our annual national plans.

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Members of Team Kilo Fight.

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YOUNG ACHIEVER

## KUET students design racing car with jute fibre

MAISHA ISLAM MONAMEE

Team Kilo Fight, a group of students from Khulna University of Engineering and Technology (KUET), participated in the UK's Formula Student (FS) this year virtually. It is an annual engineering competition where participants are expected to design small-scale formula style racing cars. The event is run by the Institution of Mechanical Engineers. It is regarded as Europe's most established educational engineering competition, and is backed by industry and high-profile engineers.

It provides students with a taste of real-world experience, combining practical engineering with necessary soft skills, like business planning and project management.

Team Kilo Fight built a model Formula One racing car using jute fibre. Their environmentally-friendly car, Kilo Flight Alpha, is a milestone for the automobile sector of Ban-

gladesh. The vehicle is capable of running at 162 km/h. Its body, aerodynamic devices, air intake system, and driver's seat are all made of jute composite.

Team Kilo Flight worked on the car for about three years before showcasing it at the event. They were the only Bangladeshi team among participants from 64 other countries. "It took us four months to construct the vehicle while the designing and other procedures took another two and half years," shared Arfan Islam, the team captain.

"Initially we could not manage enough funds for this project. We also lacked the technological backup required for the construction and testing of our automobile," explained Md Mohiuddin, one of their deputy captains.

As FS is a year-round competition, the team submitted several design specifications and reports throughout the year. "During

the final day, we gave a presentation through Microsoft Teams and provided insights on our design, while sharing our reasoning, cost reporting, management, and validation," said Sagor Mozumder, another deputy captain from the team.

Team Kilo Flight was formed in 2018. Currently, they have 145 members and intend to inspire students from different fields such as textile engineering, mechanical engineering, as well as business studies, to develop their skills for the automobile sector.

Moving forward, they plan to utilise their knowledge and ideas to build commercial vehicles.

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NURTURING DREAMS

## Bangladeshi designer weaving his way to Vogue

ASHLEY SHOPTORSHI SAMADDAR

Moin Uddin, a Bangladeshi fashion designer and stylist, has been successfully working in fashion internationally for quite some time. He was honoured as one of the best-dressed gents at Vogue Fashion Night Out Sydney in 2018.

Hailing from Chattogram, Moin was intrigued by fabrics from a young age. He is an avid believer in tailored and personalised products. When it comes to clothes, he is passionate about innovative gent styles.

Moin moved to Australia in 2016. He has a Bachelor's in Marketing from Macquarie University in Sydney. Currently, he is pursuing his Master of Business Analytics Studies from the same university.

Moin was invited to a job interview at Heinemann Australia, a luxury retail company associated with top-tier brands like Louis Vuitton, Bally, Fendi, and Salvatore Ferragamo, among others. He wore a hand-made suit that he designed in Bangladesh to the interview. He was the first Bangladeshi to work in the company's Luxury Boutiques department in Australia. He also won the Duke of Edinburgh's International Award in 2015.

Later, Moin joined the renowned menswear brand, Ermenegildo Zegna, as a luxury menswear specialist. He was approached by Vogue's master photographer Liz Sunshine around the same time. "Liz appreciated my style and included my photo in the magazine," shares Moin, who also attended the Melbourne Fashion Week in 2019.

He is currently working in supply chain and marketing with renowned brands like Roger La Viale, Ermenegildo Zegna, Vitale Barberis Canonico, Linen Club, Arvind, Tessuti, Jacquard, Australian Wool, and Merino Wool



Moin Uddin.

PHOTO: COURTESY

by providing high quality Cashmere fabrics.

Moin returned to Chattogram last year to establish his own menswear brand, Salvatorini. His brand combines the sartorial tradition of clothing with textile innovation. The designer believes that being ethical, transparent, and innovative is important in the fashion industry. He looks to create a fashion revolution for Bangladesh by taking his hand-made creations to global platforms.

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