

## ACC must embrace independent oversight

Repeated graft allegations against ACC officials raise concerns

The shocking revelation that corruption within our national graft watchdog, the Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC), has reached a critical point is profoundly alarming. As reported in this newspaper, six top officials were dismissed this year alone, and two former chiefs of the commission are currently under investigation. The report further noted that over the past 17 years, 245 ACC officials have faced disciplinary actions for bribery, unethical gains, and direct involvement in corruption. Their penalties, ranging from salary cuts to dismissals, have been limited to internal action, with no criminal prosecution in sight.

These developments demonstrate that the institution's internal disciplinary mechanisms have failed and can no longer be allowed to operate in their current form. Yet the current chairman, Mohammad Abdul Momen, insists that the ACC takes immediate action whenever allegations arise, an assertion that belies deep-rooted inertia or unwillingness to adopt meaningful reforms. The ACC's continued reliance on internal monitoring and disciplinary processes is destined to be ineffective as internal investigations lack the independence of external oversight bodies, leaving them vulnerable to bias and inadequate scrutiny. The commission must therefore adopt the reforms recommended by the ACC Reform Commission.

It is worth recalling that the reform commission proposed establishing an oversight mechanism through a high-powered task force composed of representatives from intelligence and investigative agencies. This task force would be responsible for identifying corrupt officials and pursuing both disciplinary and criminal proceedings against them. The commission also recommended dissolving the ACC's internal anti-corruption committee and replacing it with an independent disciplinary division consisting of ACC personnel and individuals appointed on deputation from defence, intelligence, and law enforcement agencies.

This division would enforce the code of conduct, run covert investigations and counter-intelligence operations, review asset declarations, and impose punitive measures. Although asset declarations are mandatory under the ACC (Employees) Service Rules, 2008, the integrity of the verification process remains highly questionable to this day.

It bears recalling that the ACC reform proposals have received overwhelming support from political parties across the spectrum, signalling a strong desire for institutional transformation in the post-autocratic transition to democracy. The July National Charter, too, commits to reforming the ACC by ensuring its independence and effectiveness. Nothing, therefore, should be allowed to stand in the way. We echo the frustration voiced by anti-corruption advocates, including the Transparency International Bangladesh (TIB), who rightly argued that departmental actions such as dismissal are far from sufficient. Every corrupt official must face prosecution, and the proceeds of their crimes—their illicit wealth—must be confiscated.

## Don't allow abuse in agro-industries

Enforce labour law for women's safety and dignity

The findings presented at this year's Annual BIDS Conference on Development reveal a long-running but largely unaddressed problem in Bangladesh's agro-based industries: the routine mistreatment of women workers. The study—carried out in Mymensingh, Narayanganj, Gazipur, Dhaka, Cumilla and Chattogram districts, covering 510 female respondents—shows that 61.37 percent of them had faced verbal and emotional abuse, which is nearly three in five women. It also shows that one in nine reports sexual or physical harassment. In most cases, supervisors are responsible. The statistics point to a clear abuse of authority inside factories that rely heavily on women's labour, yet provide little protection or oversight. The findings also indicate an existing work culture where intimidation and coercion have been allowed to take root.

The study also lays out the difficult conditions under which women work. They spend an average of 51.6 hours a week on the job, and nine in 10 say overtime is compulsory. Despite this, only 6.3 percent receive the double overtime pay required by law. Facilities that should be standard remain rare, as just 21 percent of enterprises have childcare rooms, and only 31 percent grant fully paid maternity leave. When these work conditions are combined with limited say in household decisions, poor representation at work, and a lack of awareness of their rights, the picture becomes even dire. Women are operating in environments where neglect, overwork, and mistreatment blend into everyday life.

Other studies presented at the same session show how uneven the wider labour market is. Workers in major cities earn far more—2.6 times more on average—than those in rural areas. Rural wages have grown slowly over the past decade, leaving many outside metropolitan areas with few opportunities. For women in agro-industries, often located in smaller towns or peri-urban regions, this means their ability to leave abusive workplaces is even more limited. When job options are narrow and wages low, employers can get away with practices that would not stand in more regulated or better-paid sectors.

These findings clearly show that the problem is not a shortage of rules, but a failure to enforce them. Authorities must strengthen inspections, penalise enterprises that ignore labour law and standards. Also, the availability of basic, gender-responsive facilities must be ensured at every workplace. Reporting systems must be safe, simple and shield workers from retaliation, particularly when supervisors are the offenders. Protecting the women who keep the wheels of our economy running will not happen through small adjustments. It requires firm action, proper monitoring, and a commitment to ensuring that safety and dignity are not treated as optional extras in the workplace.

# How to bridge education and employment in Bangladesh

MACRO MIRROR



Dr. Fahmida Khatun is executive director at the Centre for Policy Dialogue. Views expressed in this article are the author's own.

FAHMIDA KHATUN

Bangladesh's inability to create adequate opportunities for its young population has moved far beyond an economic concern. It represents a significant social and political challenge for the country. Persistent and high rates of youth unemployment expose deep structural weaknesses in an economy that has failed to translate its growth into more jobs. Instead of benefitting from the country's development gains, crores of young people find themselves excluded from productive work, which creates frustration and undermines weakened social cohesion. If this disconnect continues, it will jeopardise Bangladesh's long-term development trajectory and erode the very demographic dividend that should have been one of its greatest strengths.

The statistics paint an even starker picture of the employment situation. The Labour Force Survey 2024 of the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS) indicated that in 2024, the unemployment rate was 3.66 percent compared to 3.35 percent in 2023. Of this, the rate of literate unemployment is 4.17 percent and of non-literate 1.39 percent. Unemployment among the educated is higher, indicating greater competition for jobs among educated people. Another striking fact is, although the unemployment rate appears low, youth unemployment and youth inactivity are very high. Unemployment rate among youth aged 15-29 years is 8.07 percent. However, the share of young people aged 15-29 years who are not in education, employment, or training (NEET) is 20.3 percent. The distribution of unemployment by educational level shows that, among the 26.24 lakh unemployed, graduates account for the highest share at 8.85 lakh.

The roots of Bangladesh's youth unemployment crisis lie in a longstanding mismatch between education and labour-market needs. The education system continues to emphasise degrees rather than practical, job-ready skills, which leaves many graduates without the competencies employers expect. Employers often report a shortage of candidates with technical abilities, digital literacy, or industry-specific training. Technical and vocational institutes, which should fill this gap,

remain underfunded, outdated, and weakly linked to industry. As a result, young people are unprepared for emerging opportunities in a changing economy.

Another critical issue is the immense pressure on public-sector employment. For many young Bangladeshis, government jobs are considered the only viable route to stability, recognition, and social prestige. Moreover, the

private sector has not been able to generate enough high-quality jobs to absorb new entrants since private investment remained stagnant for over a decade due to various policy and regulatory shortcomings. Most youth who find work end up in informal, low-paying, insecure employment. They earn too little to build a future and receive none of the benefits or protections that come with formal work. High informality, weak social protection, gender disparities, and significant rural-urban inequality hamper Bangladesh's labour market. Young women face additional structural barriers related to mobility, social norms, and unpaid care responsibilities.

Global changes in the nature of work also complicate the situation. Automation, digitisation, and artificial intelligence are reshaping labour markets everywhere. Globally, employers struggle to find workers with the right technical skills,

even though large numbers of young people remain unemployed. Though Bangladesh is far behind in technological advancement, some industries are moving quickly to adopt technology in their workplace. Without a significant shift in skills upgradation, not only will the existing jobs be lost, but employers will find it challenging to find a technologically equipped workforce.

Unfortunately, the interim government has not introduced any major employment programme, increased investment in skill development, or redesigned the vocational training system. The absence of a proactive, visible change in the approach to youth employment reflects the government's reluctance and lack of urgency in addressing this pressing issue.

Reforms within public-sector hiring are equally urgent. Recruitment must be strictly merit-based, transparent, and completed on predictable timelines so people can trust the system. A credible and fair process would ease frustration, restore confidence in state institutions, and significantly improve government service delivery by ensuring that qualified and competent individuals, rather than political favourites, occupy important administrative and technical positions.

The private sector needs to play a much larger role in creating jobs for young people. Of course, this will only happen if the government makes it easier and more attractive for firms to hire and train youth. Tax incentives can lower recruitment costs, while subsidised apprenticeship programmes would allow companies to train fresh graduates without bearing the full financial burden. While the government will be a major supporter, it may approach development partners and bilateral agencies to fund skills and employment initiatives.

In parallel, youth entrepreneurship should be nurtured to generate employment. This requires accessible and affordable financing for young innovators, business incubators that provide technical and strategic support, mentorship networks connecting new entrepreneurs with experienced professionals, and structured access to domestic and export markets. These initiatives can help young people build their own enterprises, create jobs for others, and participate more productively in the economy.

Finally, Bangladesh must commit to evidence-based policymaking, especially regarding youth employment. Reliable labour market data, regular outcome evaluations, and continuous monitoring are essential for understanding which programmes actually create jobs for young people and which do not. Without accurate information, policies become fragmented, resources are wasted, and well-intentioned initiatives fail to reach the youth who need them most. Effective data systems would enable the government to identify emerging skills shortages, track employment trends, design targeted training programmes, and adjust interventions based on real results.



FILE ILLUSTRATION: BIPOLOB CHAKROBORTY

However, if the country is to harness its demographic dividend, it must change its approach to youth employment. Reforming the skill-development ecosystem is essential. Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) institutions must be modernised, equipped with industry-standard technology, and guided by curricula shaped in collaboration with employers. Training should focus on sectors where both global and domestic demand are growing rapidly. These include information and communication technology, healthcare and caregiving services, renewable energy and green technologies, logistics, transport and supply chain management, and advanced manufacturing. Bangladesh also has expanding opportunities in agro-processing, pharmaceuticals, tourism and hospitality, construction, and digital financial services, all of which require a skilled young workforce. By aligning training with

private sector has not been able to generate enough high-quality jobs to absorb new entrants since private investment remained stagnant for over a decade due to various policy and regulatory shortcomings. Most youth who find work end up in informal, low-paying, insecure employment. They earn too little to build a future and receive none of the benefits or protections that come with formal work. High informality, weak social protection, gender disparities, and significant rural-urban inequality hamper Bangladesh's labour market. Young women face additional structural barriers related to mobility, social norms, and unpaid care responsibilities.

## HUMAN RIGHTS DAY

# Time to build on NHRC momentum to protect human rights



Stefan Liller is resident representative of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) in Bangladesh.

STEFAN LILLER

On December 10, the world pauses to commemorate Human Rights Day, recalling the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948. That landmark text enshrined dignity, equality, and justice as universal values. For Bangladesh, this year's observance carries a particular weight. It comes at a moment when recent reforms—including the adoption of a new legal framework for the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC)—offer a rare chance to move beyond aspirations and begin building institutions that can deliver real protection every day. This opportunity must not be missed. It is a mandate to government, civil society, and human rights defenders alike, and one that international partners stand ready to support.

The urgency of reform is underscored by wounds that remain raw. Violence against protesters in the summer of 2024 shook the nation's conscience. A fact-finding report by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) documented killings,

life-altering injuries, and arbitrary detentions. The Commission of Inquiry on Enforced Disappearances reviewed hundreds of cases, exposing patterns

**As a first and most urgent step, commissioners must be appointed transparently to start the required internal reforms of the NHRC, and the necessary resources must be allocated. The NHRC can become a platform for civil society, human rights defenders, and victims who have waited too long for credible protection. But its strength will depend on collective will.**

of abuse that have scarred families and communities. Behind these reports are the lives of ordinary people: parents searching for disappeared children; survivors carrying the physical and psychological marks of arbitrary detention and torture; a media landscape bruised by repression; and civil society structures tested by attempts at silencing. Trust in institutions cannot be rebuilt

overnight, but disillusionment should not deter reform aspirations.

The revision of the NHRC's legal basis marks a departure from past practice. More than 600 voices—victims, human rights defenders, and community representatives from Cox's Bazar to Rajshahi—contributed to consultations in person and online. Their accounts were painful, their scepticism palpable, yet their willingness to engage demonstrated remarkable resilience. Expert input from the United Nations and others enriched the process. For the first

through visits to detention facilities. While still not satisfying everyone's expectations, it is a genuine attempt to empower an institution long criticised as ineffective.

Of course, implementation of the ordinance will be the true measure of the success of this reform, and the moment to act is now. As a first and most urgent step, commissioners must be appointed transparently to start the required internal reforms of the NHRC, and the necessary resources must be allocated. The NHRC can become a platform for civil society, human rights defenders, and victims who have waited too long for credible protection. But its strength will depend on collective will. The new parliament will be called upon to endorse the ordinance and give the NHRC a constitutional footing.

Human Rights Day 2025 can be more than a commemoration. It can be the turning point when Bangladesh moves from reflection to action, when the new National Human Rights Commission and other reformed institutions established on paper are also empowered to deliver justice, accountability, and protection. The interim government, incoming leadership, and every citizen share this responsibility. These reforms are not an end in themselves but the foundation for a prosperous and peaceful future. At UNDP, we remain steadfast in our commitment to walk with Bangladesh on this journey—from painful lessons to a hopeful future, where rights are both declared and delivered.