

Why Bangladesh must act on its NEET generation now



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When Rina finished secondary school in a small town near Khulna, she expected her education would open doors. It did not. Like many young people in Bangladesh, she realised that academic certificates alone no longer guarantee employment.

Determined to change her fate, she completed a skills training programme. The training offered opportunities, but not in ways she could afford. The jobs were in Dhaka, far from her family. Taking one meant paying for accommodation, leaving loved ones behind, and surviving on wages that barely allowed her to support her household.

Ultimately, the opportunity remained out of reach. Rina's story reflects a wider reality: education without employability, skills without accessible jobs and opportunities that exist only for those who can shoulder the cost of distance.

Today, Rina is part of Bangladesh's growing NEET population - young people who are Not in Education,

Employment, or Training. Behind this technical term are real lives, quiet frustration, and untapped potential. It poses a critical question: what happens when a generation is ready to contribute, but the system is not ready for them?

A demographic opportunity at risk
Bangladesh is often celebrated for its young population. Nearly one-third of its citizens are between 15 and 34 years old. Yet this advantage is slipping away. According to the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, 30.9 percent of young people fall into the NEET category, and 12 percent of university graduates remain unemployed. Each year, nearly two million young people enter the labour market, many encountering limited opportunities, mismatched skills, or extended inactivity.

This is not only an economic concern but also a social one. Prolonged unemployment and disengagement erode confidence, deepen inequality and fuel frustration. If left unaddressed, the NEET phenomenon could turn a demographic dividend into a liability.

Skills alone are not enough
Bangladesh has invested in skills development, but training alone does not guarantee employment. Too often, young people finish courses only to find that the market does not need the skills they have learned.

What is needed is a demand driven skills ecosystem that adapts to economic change. Job growth is concentrated in sectors such as information and communication technology, healthcare and caregiving, renewable energy, green technologies, logistics, transport, and supply chains. Demand is also rising in agro-processing, pharmaceuticals, construction, tourism and hospitality, and digital financial services.

Many young people are still being



FILE ILLUSTRATION: BIPLOB CHAKROBORTY

trained for jobs with limited prospects. Aligning skills development with these emerging sectors is critical to ensuring training leads to meaningful employment. Recognition of prior learning, flexible training pathways, and stronger employer partnerships can help youth move from learning to earning.

Decent work is essential

Employment alone is not enough. Many young people face low wages, unsafe conditions, long hours, and little social protection, especially in informal or overseas work. This is why decent work must be central to youth employment strategies.

Decent work means fair pay, safe workplaces, social protection, and respect for rights. It also includes opportunities for growth and stability. Without these elements, employment nurtures vulnerability rather than security.

Why young women must be prioritised

Reducing the NEET rate requires

supporting young women. Affordable childcare, safe transport, flexible training schedules and community awareness can make a transformative difference. When women enter the workforce, households earn more, children stay in school longer and communities grow stronger.

Investing in young women is not charity. It is one of the smartest economic strategies a country can pursue.

What young people can do

Youth also have a role. In a rapidly changing labour market, passivity is costly. Young people must seek information, understand which skills are in demand, and take ownership of their career paths. Self-awareness - knowing one's strengths, interests, and potential - is the first step. From there, adaptability, lifelong learning, and persistence are key.

Employers value not only technical skills but also communication, teamwork, problem solving, and

resilience. Combining these with curiosity and a willingness to learn ensures long term employability.

A job should not just pay the bills. It should offer dignity, stability, and a chance to build a better life.

What educators and institutions can do

Despite training offered by more than 23 ministries, many seats remain unfilled, while graduates struggle to find work. This points to a mismatch between education and labour market demand.

Training institutions must go beyond classroom teaching. Career guidance, counselling, industry linkages, and job placement support should be standard. Educators must also work with parents and communities to highlight the value of technical and vocational pathways.

When education is aligned with market demand, it becomes a powerful engine of opportunity.

A moment of choice

Bangladesh has a critical opportunity. With the right policies, investments, and partnerships, the NEET generation can become a skilled, productive workforce.

This requires strong coordination between education institutions and industry, investment in demand-driven skills development, expansion of public employment services, a commitment to decent work and meaningful inclusion of youth voices in policymaking.

Bangladesh has talent and ambition. What it needs is a system that connects young people to opportunity fairly, effectively, and at scale.

If we act now, today's NEET generation can become tomorrow's drivers of growth.

If we delay, we risk losing a generation ready to contribute but still waiting to be included.

The choice is ours.

KEY POINTS

1. Align skills training with high-growth sectors through employer-led, demand-driven planning.
2. Prioritise decent work standards to ensure jobs provide security, dignity, and progression.
3. Expand targeted support for young women, including childcare, safety, and flexible training.
4. Strengthen career guidance, industry linkages, and job placement across education institutions.
5. Coordinate education, industry, and public employment services through a unified youth strategy.



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