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# From girl brides to a broken labour market

Loitering in the shadows of tin-roofed houses is Fatema's pastime. She avoids being at home—a single room in a low-income settlement shared by her eight-member family. At 16, her body and mind, going through the turbulence of adolescence, no longer feel safe in confinement.

Her mother notices stolen glances at Fatema from nearby houses, which fills her with unease. Fearful that something "unholy" might happen to the girl, she decides to marry the teenager off instead of helping her prepare for the Secondary School Certificate (SSC) examinations.

Fatema gives her consent without much convincing, a fact that hurts even the family eager to send her away. To her, marriage would materialise her fantasies—clothes with flowers woven into them and a room of her own. Her mother, too, had fancied those things at that age, and that dream has since turned into the family life both of them are now living.

Fatema belongs to the group of NEET young women aged 15 to 24—those who are neither in education, nor in employment or training. In Bangladesh, one in four young women

are NEET, compared to more than one in ten young men. These are not isolated groups divided by gender. In fact, they are interlinked: NEET women of one generation give rise to NEET men and women in the next, producing an overall inefficient labour force.

The high NEET rate is the outcome of the staggering proportion of girls—51%, according to United Nations estimates—who were married before turning 18 between 2006 and 2024. There are no disaggregated data on child marriage across social and economic classes. However, the World Bank's latest projection of a 21.2% national poverty rate makes it evident that child marriage is not confined to the poorest households; rather, it persists—more or less—across all classes.

Fatema and other girls like her give birth at a very early age, when they themselves are bewildered by sudden physical and emotional changes. They step into socially defined adulthood with their adolescence abruptly cut short. Crushed under the heavy burden of housework and childcare, they may somehow manage to meet the basic needs of family members, but they struggle almost daily to navigate complex relationships, economic and social subjugation, and impossibly high gendered expectations.

These mothers are expected to serve everyone in the household, while fathers make all major decisions. Children growing up in such families witness an imbalanced power dynamic. Mothers, who lack economic and social agency, are nonetheless responsible for nearly all aspects of their children's lives—education, health, food, sports, and even issues of psychological wellbeing related to friendships, anger, happiness, and a sense of purpose.

Children—both boys and girls—come to accept the inequalities they observe at home as social, cultural, or even religious norms. Girls may eventually

become child brides themselves unless unusual self-determination or unforeseen social, economic, or familial shocks divert them from that path.

Most girl brides drop out of the formal education system after marriage and find themselves unprepared to care for the wellbeing of their in-laws, a role given without being asked. They

much of their lives learning only from formal curricula, if they attend school at all, while the home environment contributes little to their intellectual growth or learning behaviour.

Although there are no disaggregated data on short- and long-term NEET status, it is evident that girl brides are far more likely to become



There are no disaggregated data on child marriage across social and economic classes.

PHOTO: COLLECTED

have little opportunity to acquire skills of any kind, let alone those required for employment. What often goes unnoticed in this social structure is that these unskilled and undereducated women are relied upon to raise future generations of skilled workers.

Boys begin to disregard their mothers once they recognise their superior social status over women. As a result, they are at higher risk of dropping out of school themselves, driven by factors such as drug abuse, the lure of illegal activities promising quick money, or an inability to keep up academically—because no one at home is able to address their learning gaps.

In such a social fabric, children spend

permanently NEET. In some cases—such as the premature death of a male breadwinner—women may be forced to earn for subsistence. At that point, they typically enter informal, underpaid or low-paid, mostly invisible and unrecognised work.

Men who discontinue education early also acquire limited or no skills and are similarly destined for informal, low-paid jobs. Their stunted intellectual development often makes it difficult to acquire new skills on the job, leaving them professionally stagnant. In the worst cases, they hop from one job to another simply to survive.

In the era of automation, joblessness among the low-skilled and unskilled

has already intensified. Artificial Intelligence (AI) is likely to aggravate the crisis further, rendering even some university graduates irrelevant in the labour market unless they possess creativity, innovation, and human skills that AI cannot replace.

Bangladesh's NEET rate is already high by global standards. Current socioeconomic conditions, combined with the gradual adoption of AI, will continue to limit young people's entry into the job market. Meanwhile, older generations—often inadequately skilled themselves—will hold on to positions of power.

This skill gap explains why employers frequently claim they have vacancies but cannot find suitable candidates. In the absence of a skilled workforce, the deployment of AI is likely to accelerate. Policymakers often emphasise the need to reform the education system to address labour-market challenges, but the deeper, household-level roots of the problem continue to intensify in silence.

To stem the tide of NEET, the government must prevent girls from dropping out of school through scholarships and incentives, ensure a gender-friendly learning environment, and mobilise social and community-level movements that promote learning regardless of age or gender.

Above all, rigorous research is needed to generate nuanced data on gender dynamics across social, cultural, and economic spectra. Such evidence is essential for policymakers to design effective interventions.

As a developing country, Bangladesh may have more time to prepare for AI driven changes, but eventually all of us will need to become agile and committed learners for the collective prosperity of the nation. Learning and teaching, therefore, must focus on nurturing creativity and thinking beyond age-old frameworks.

## KEY POINTS

1. Prevent child marriage through strict enforcement, incentives, and community monitoring.
2. Keep girls in school with scholarships, safety, and flexible learning pathways.
3. Support mothers' education and parenting skills to break intergenerational inequality.
4. Embed life skills, gender equality, and caregiving education from early childhood.
5. Invest in gender-disaggregated data and household-focused policy interventions.



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