

Speakers attend a roundtable titled "Skills to Employment: Building an Inclusive Labour Market for Youth with Disabilities", jointly organised by the Bangladesh Business and Disability Network and BRAC Bank at The Daily Star Centre in Dhaka yesterday. PHOTO: **PRABIR DAS**

Coordinated efforts key to jobs for youth with disabilities

Roundtable urges inclusive training and stronger public-private collaboration

STAR BUSINESS REPORT

Bangladesh needs coordinated efforts by the government, employers, training institutions and development organisations to help young people with disabilities transition from skills development to decent employment, speakers said at a roundtable yesterday.

They identified barriers including inaccessible workplaces and transport, employers' misconceptions, inadequate skills training, weak coordination among agencies and a lack of reliable employment data.

The speakers called for competency-based training, stronger private-sector engagement and better workplace support to help young people with disabilities secure and retain jobs.

The discussion, titled "Skills to Employment: Building an Inclusive Labour Market for Youth with Disabilities", was jointly organised by the Bangladesh Business and Disability Network (BBDN) and BRAC Bank at The Daily Star Centre in Dhaka.

Shamarukh Fakhruddin, trustee of BBDN, said creating an inclusive labour market required coordinated efforts by the government and private sector.

"The mindset of employers is extremely important. We need to ask whether they are genuinely willing to recruit persons with disabilities and whether the workplace ecosystem allows them to work effectively," she said.

Even when employers arranged transport and adapted factories, inaccessible roads and surrounding infrastructure could prevent workers with disabilities from reaching their workplaces, she said, calling for broader government intervention.

"Training should not be considered the end of our responsibility. We need to develop courses in consultation with employers, prepare participants for recruitment and provide mentoring and support after they join the workplace," she added.

Joha Jamilur Rahman, head of training at the Metropolitan Chamber of Commerce and Industry (MCCI), said employers remained concerned about workplace accessibility, accommodation costs, safety and gaps between candidates' skills and industry requirements.

MCCI could help member companies recruit persons with disabilities by connecting them with specialised training institutions, promoting inclusive recruitment and internship programmes, and advocating simpler tax incentives, Joha said.

Speakers called for competency-based training, stronger private-sector engagement and better workplace support to help young people with disabilities secure and retain jobs

Masreka Khan, senior programme officer at the International Labour Organization, called for stronger coordination among the government, employers and workers, alongside more flexible admission criteria for persons with disabilities seeking technical and vocational education.

"We need a coordinated approach involving the government, employers and workers to make the labour market more inclusive," she said.

She also stressed the need to translate policies into practical workplace guidelines and improve recruitment and job retention.

Md Ruhul Amin, chairman of the Bangladesh Technical Education Board, said students with disabilities received admission quotas, extra examination time and scribes where needed.

"We have a 1 percent admission quota in certain programmes, while a 5 percent quota applies to skills development programmes," he said.

The board offered diploma programmes in around 32 technologies, SSC vocational courses in 29 trades and short courses in 123 trades. Accessibility was also being considered in new technical education facilities, he added.

Nazneen Kawshar Chowdhury, executive chairman of the National Skills Development Authority (NSDA), said around 43 percent of skills training providers were underutilised, partly because of a shortage of qualified trainers.

"Completion-based training does not necessarily produce skilled workers. We must focus on competency-based training so that trainees acquire the skills employers need," she said.

The NSDA aims to build a pool of 10,000 trainers by 2030 but has trained around 3,000 so far, she added. Under a project implemented with German cooperation, 3,000 people are expected to receive technical skills training, with 900 targeted for employment by June 2027.

Md Abdul Karim, executive director of UCEP Bangladesh, said the organisation provided job training, career counselling and post-placement monitoring to help persons with disabilities secure and retain employment. Its job placement rate was 75 percent, he said.

Training curricula must reflect industry demand, and employers should be involved in both training and job placement, he said, stressing the need for accessible training equipment and workplaces.

Salma Mahbub, executive director of Bangladesh Society for the Change and Advocacy Nexus (B-SCAN), said a lack of reliable, disaggregated data made it difficult to assess the labour-market participation of persons with disabilities and design effective employment programmes.

"Based on our experience, we know that people with different types of disabilities are engaged in various economic activities, but we need reliable data to understand their participation and employment patterns," she said.

Shafiq R Bhuiyan, head of internal communication and CSR at BRAC Bank, called for training programmes tailored to participants' abilities and employers' needs, alongside better measurement of outcomes.

"Our aim is to provide training that produces measurable outcomes, so that after three months, six months or a year, we can demonstrate the impact of the technical skills participants have acquired," he said, adding that measuring the impact remained a challenge.

Nazma Ara Begum Poppy, national project support officer at UN Women Bangladesh, said women with disabilities faced additional barriers, including social stigma, limited access to information, transport difficulties and family restrictions.

Ekram Kabir, senior executive vice-president for communication at BRAC Bank, said growing willingness among commercial banks to support young people with disabilities was encouraging. Bangladesh Bank was also working on comprehensive corporate social responsibility guidelines addressing these issues, he added.

Sousan Suha, youth engagement analyst at UNDP Bangladesh, also spoke at the event, which was moderated by Tanjim Ferdous, head of strategic partnership at The Daily Star.

The merchandiser's vulnerable phone

ZEESHAN R KHAN

Nasrin is a senior merchandiser at a knitwear factory in Gazipur. She handles two European buyers who keep her phone busy past midnight: WhatsApp groups with sourcing teams and production managers, emails about shipments, photos of lab dips and costing sheets. To understand the account, its prices, people and payment history, you would need her phone.

One night, she needs to sign a PDF, but her usual app will not open it. A friend sends her a link to a free "pro" editor. It asks for accessibility permission to "work properly". It is late, the buyer is waiting, and she taps yes. Nasrin is invented. What happens next is not unusual.

For weeks, nothing happens. The app reads her screen, including notifications, and passes information on. Then the buyer's finance team receives a revised proforma invoice from Nasrin's email, inside the real thread, with genuine order numbers. The factory has changed banks, it says; please use the new account. The buyer pays. A month later, the factory asks where its money is. The buyer sends the remittance slip. Both are telling the truth. The money is gone.

Nobody hacked the factory's servers. The IT team had secured the office computers. The breach came through a phone the company did not own or manage.

This is the overlooked part of Bangladesh's export supply chain. The garment industry runs on speed, and speed runs on WhatsApp. Tech packs, prices, approvals and payment instructions travel through personal phones, often shared with family and rarely protected beyond a screen lock. After 2013, the industry learned, at terrible cost, to treat physical safety as part of what it sells. Digital safety has yet to have its moment.



Bangladesh's garment industry has strengthened physical safety, but personal phones remain vulnerable to cybercrime, exposing factories and buyers to payment fraud

The attacks are improving. Fake invoice emails once gave themselves away through stiff English or odd greetings. Now AI tools can study Nasrin's messages and write like her, mixing English and Bangla and signing off with "Rgds." They can also clone a voice from a short voice note. Even a buyer calling to check may hear a convincing imitation.

So where do you start?

With the phone. Most of what happened to Nasrin depended on one permission granted without thought. Accessibility and notification access are legitimate features, but a PDF editor does not need them. Security software can flag apps requesting unnecessary permissions and check those installed through links rather than the Play Store. For anyone handling a buyer account, this protection should be as routine as a factory ID card. Compared with one diverted payment, the cost is small.

Then with payments. Bank details should never change because an email or WhatsApp message says so. A call to a known number before any change takes effect would prevent many frauds. Better still, payment details could sit in a shared record visible to both factory and buyer, with every change signed and dated.

Finally, the data. Costing sheets and buyer contacts do not belong in chat groups that grow through forwarding. When a merchandiser joins a competitor, the factory may not know what she still holds. Trade platforms can give buyers, factories and auditors limited access, ending when the job does. These records can also help factories prove where their cotton came from when EU or US customers ask.

None of this requires a big IT department. Owners and managers must accept that a merchandiser's phone is part of the factory, as much as the cutting floor or warehouse, and its security is their responsibility. Next time a buyer visits, someone will show them the fire exits and extinguishers. They should also show them how merchandisers' phones are protected.

The writer is a software industry leader in Silicon Valley

Saudi Arabia to store oil in Singapore to secure Asian supplies

REUTERS, *Singapore*

Saudi Arabia plans to store crude oil at Singapore's Jurong Rock Caverns from the second half of 2027 to strengthen supply security in the region, energy ministers from both countries said on Monday.

The move comes after the US-Israeli war with Iran severely disrupted energy supplies to Asia shipped through the Strait of Hormuz, prompting countries to draw down inventories and raising concerns about stockpile levels globally. Asia imported two-thirds of its oil supplies from the Middle East before the war.

"Saudi Arabia and Singapore are announcing our joint intent to establish an arrangement for Saudi crude oil to be stored at the Jurong Rock Caverns from the second half of 2027," Tan See Leng, minister for energy, trade and industry, told the Singapore International Energy Week conference.

"This arrangement enhances the resilience of the Saudi crude oil supply chain in Southeast Asia, as well as contributes to Singapore's energy security and resilience in the event of supply disruptions."

Tan said Saudi Aramco will sign a memorandum of understanding with the Energy Market Authority and JTC Corp on Monday and aimed to conclude negotiations in a few months' time.

"Bringing supply closer to key Asian markets would strengthen the flexibility of our supply network and support Singapore's security of supply and preparedness," Saudi Arabia's Energy Minister Prince Abdulaziz bin Salman Al-Saud said in a video recording at the conference.

Job concerns rise in China as AI-generated actors take roles

ANN/CHINA DAILY

Artificial intelligence-generated actors are moving from online short dramas into advertising and other commercial settings in China, offering production teams a cheaper and more controllable alternative to human performers, while raising questions about employment and the future of the entertainment industry.

Li Xiaolong, a young actor and student at the Shanghai Theatre Academy who stars in the short play My Dual Control, said the growing use of AI performers could further narrow job opportunities for human actors as film and television productions face tighter budgets.

A friend working in Hengdian, Zhejiang province, one of China's major film and television production centers, told Li that fewer actors were working there, with some leaving the profession or taking jobs as costumed performers at tourist attractions. While anecdotal, the account reflects the uncertainty facing some performers.

AI performers give production teams greater control over expressions and movements through text-based instructions, while generally costing less than human actors, Li said. Producers can revise scenes by adjusting prompts, reducing the need for repeated filming. Opportunities have also become harder to secure for actors without a strong personal following. In Li's experience, even day-rate jobs that once paid more than 1,000 yuan ($150) have become difficult to obtain.

Despite these pressures, Li believes human performance retains qualities AI has not fully replicated. Audiences watching AI short dramas may focus primarily on the plot, he said, and AI performers may suffice when their expressions and actions fit the story. Some viewers, however, continue to prefer the realism and nuance of human acting.



People walk next to a poster of the AI-generated movie "Sanxingdui: Future Memories" in a cinema in the Jing'an Temple district in Shanghai on October 22. PHOTO: **AFP**

Li recalled a teacher describing acting as: "Living people performing living people for living people". Building a role requires research into a character's background and relationships, along with emotional exploration that helps actors bring the character to life. Human performers can show how emotions develop, while AI-generated performances may deliver an immediate result without conveying the same process.

The commercial rise of AI actors can be seen in Fang Taozi, an AI-generated actress whose profile has grown alongside the popularity of AI short dramas. With blunt bangs, long straight black hair and two distinctive moles, she has developed a recognizable appearance and attracted a substantial following on short-video platforms.

The AI drama The Laid-off Girl, which debuted on Douyin on June 12, helped bring Fang to a wider audience. By Aug 25, her Douyin account had more than 510,000 followers. On Aug 27, fashion magazine Cosmo Crush previewed her on its official Weibo account, showing how AI-generated characters are entering spaces traditionally occupied by human celebrities.

For advertisers, an AI character with a recognizable face and an established following can become a vehicle for product promotion. AI characters can maintain a consistent appearance and appear in different scenes without the logistical demands of filming with human performers, making it easier for brands to adapt materials for campaigns.

Rates listed on Douyin's Xingtu influencer marketing platform for Fang Taozi have reportedly ranged from 168,000 yuan for videos of up to 20 seconds to 208,000 yuan for videos lasting 21 to 60 seconds and 258,000 yuan for videos longer than 60 seconds. Though it should be noted that listed rates do not necessarily reflect actual transaction values or earnings.

Production costs can also be lower. Some industry reports have put the cost of AI short dramas at around 80,000 yuan per minute, though expenses vary with complexity and production methods. The DataEye Research Institute has estimated that China's market for AI short dramas, including animated dramas, could exceed 40 billion yuan in 2026, up about 138 percent year-on-year. It estimated that the market had exceeded 22 billion yuan in the first five months. These figures, though, cover AI short dramas broadly, not AI actors alone, and are industry estimates rather than official statistics.

Hou Wenjie, secretary-general of the Shanghai-based research institute Yu Ce Think Tank, said the commercial value of AI actors has moved beyond proof of concept into actual monetization.

Trump says Canada trade deal coming 'soon'

AFP, *Washington*

A trade agreement between the United States and Canada would be reached "pretty soon," President Donald Trump told a campaign rally on Sunday, nine days ahead of crucial US midterm elections.

Tensions between the North American neighbors have been high since trade talks broke down in August, with Trump imposing a slew of new tariffs in response.

"We'll have that settled pretty soon. They're willing to give us anything at this moment," the president said of an agreement during the rally in Port Huron, a Michigan town on the US-Canada border hit hard by his tariff war.

Trump once again defended his levies on Canada and accused it of "ripping off the United States for years."

The tariffs enforced after the August talks broke down impacted around US$20 billion worth of goods, ranging from hockey sticks to cement. In response, Canada imposed tolls on an equivalent amount of American products, leading Trump to retaliate with another round of levies of as much as 50 percent on certain goods.

The White House removed some of them on Friday, in response to a request from Senator Susan Collins, which has been disproportionately impacted by the trade war.