

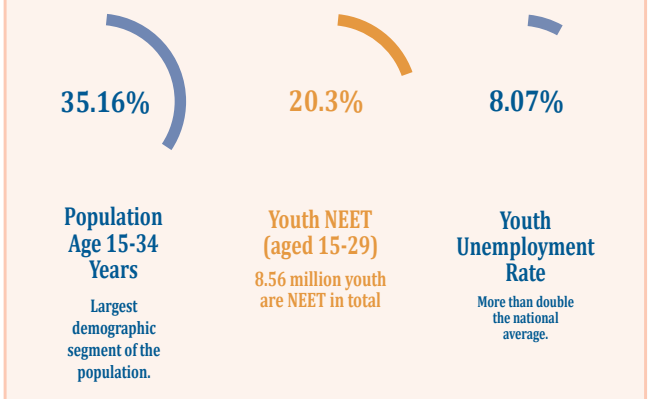
Youth Survey 2025: Tracking Perceptions on Reforms, Skills, Jobs, and Education

Bangladesh is undergoing a pivotal phase of demographic transition, with more than one-third of its population being youth, which underscores the significant demographic window of opportunity Bangladesh is currently experiencing. While opportunities abound, the question remains: how well-equipped and prepared are the youth to transform this demographic advantage into tangible dividends? Would Bangladesh be able to reap the benefits in the last stage of this advantage as the window of demographic dividend is expected to last only until 2035-36 (General Economics Division (GED), 2020)? Amidst a rapidly evolving job market, led by technological advancements and shifting global dynamics, both the labour market structure and the education system in Bangladesh are struggling to keep up.

As per the latest Quarterly Labour Force Survey–2024, two million youths are unemployed, and the youth unemployment rate is more than double (8.07%) compared to the national average (3.66%). The rate is even higher among the youths holding tertiary education. Furthermore, more than eight million youths are classified as NEET (Not in Education, Employment, or Training). The situation is exacerbated by the lack of alignment across academic curricula and industry needs, widening skill gaps, and structural hurdles to job access. Gender inequality and socio-economic obstacles further limit education and employment opportunities for many young Bangladeshis.

In addition to facing challenges related to job opportunities and access to quality education and training, young people in Bangladesh are also deprived of political participation. The July 2024 youth-led movement fundamentally altered the political and social expectations of young people in Bangladesh. This study shows that while youth aspirations for reform remain high, prolonged unemployment, skill mismatch and weak institutional responsiveness risk turning post-July hope into disengagement. If policy responses remain slow or fragmented, Bangladesh risks missing the final decade of its demographic dividend and facing deeper social and political instability driven by a frustrated youth cohort.

Figure 1: Youth Population and Employment Statistics



Source: Population and Housing Census 2022 and Quarterly Labour Force Survey 2024

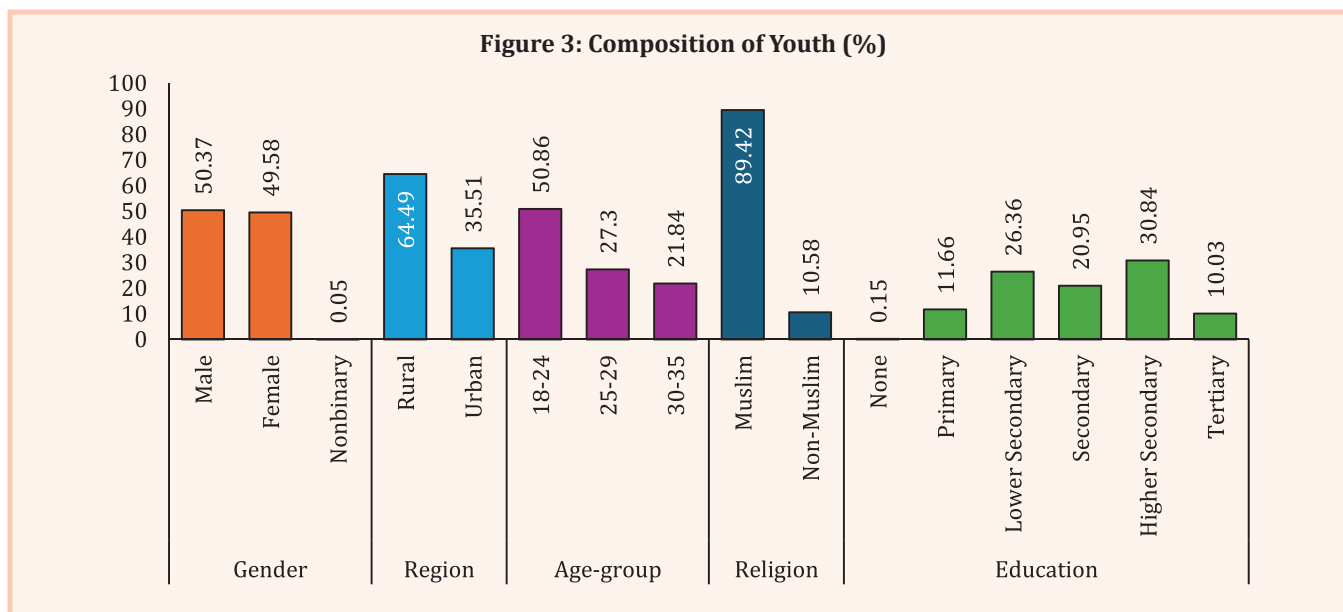
Drawing on two rounds of nationwide youth surveys, this policy brief identifies where current education, labour market, and reform processes are failing to meet youth expectations. It highlights priority reform gaps that, if left unaddressed, could undermine employment outcomes, trust in political institutions, and the sustainability of ongoing reforms.



Profile of the Surveyed Youth

Figure 3 summarizes the core demographic profile of the surveyed youth. The sample is nearly gender-balanced and predominantly rural. It is heavily concentrated in the 18–24 age group,

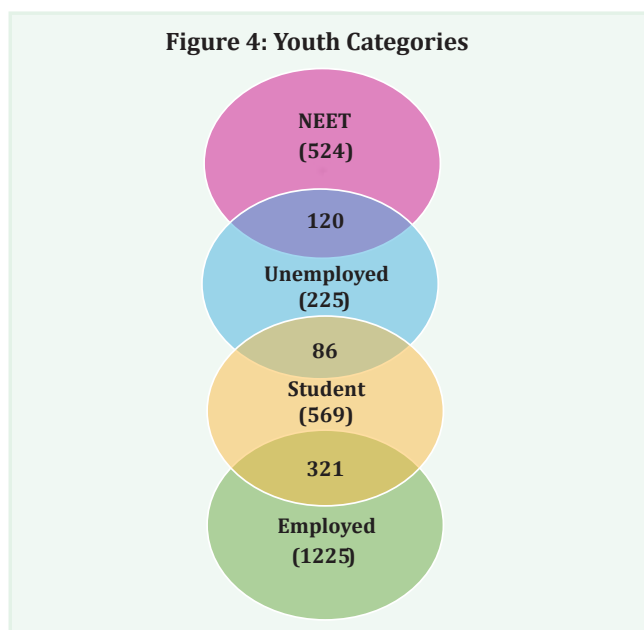
capturing a cohort at the critical juncture between education and labour market entry. Educational attainment is clustered at secondary and higher secondary levels, with limited progression to tertiary education.



Source: SANEM-AAB Youth Survey: Phase 2; Total Sample-2033

Additionally, this study categorises youth into four overlapping categories: students, employed, unemployed, and NEET, and looks at where they currently stand, what options are realistically available to them, and how prepared they feel to navigate work, income generation, and career progression (Figure 4). About 60 percent are currently employed, making employment the dominant status among surveyed youth. At the same time, 28 percent identify as students, though education and work are not always separate worlds. In fact, more than half of all students (56 percent) are also working alongside their studies. However, only 12 percent of these working students are in full-time jobs, suggesting that most student employment is temporary, informal, or low intensity.

Alongside this group, 11 percent of youth are unemployed, actively looking for work but unable to find it, while a sizable 26 percent fall into the NEET category. This NEET share is particularly concerning because it reflects a group that is largely disconnected from both skill development and income-earning opportunities. Among employed students, around 70 percent are male, highlighting that young men are far more likely to combine education with work. This imbalance does not disappear outside education. Among unemployed youth, about 60 percent are female, and the situation is even more uneven for NEET youth, where roughly 90 percent are women. Sectoral placement also provides important context for understanding youth employment quality. Most employed youth are concentrated in the



Source: SANEM-AAB Youth Survey (Round 2)

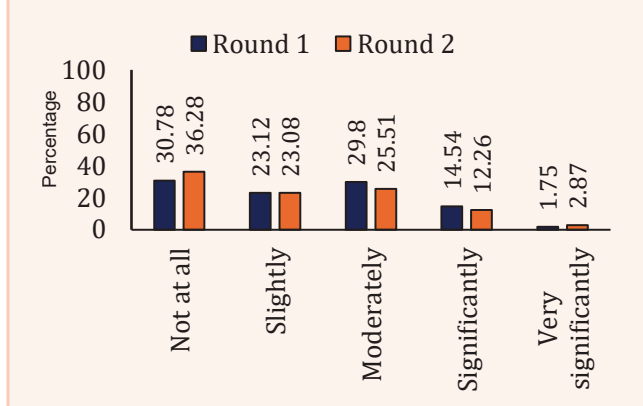
service sector, while the industry sector accounts for only about 10 percent of youth employment.

The concentration of women among NEET and unemployed youth signals not only a labour market failure but also a growing gendered exclusion that could deepen inequality and weaken reform legitimacy if not urgently addressed.

Youth Perception of Politics, Ongoing Reforms, and Their Priorities

When asked about readiness for employment, a large share of respondents across both rounds feel only partially ready. In both rounds, more than or equal to one-third of the respondents feel their education did not prepare them at all. However, students were found to be more optimistic, as 66% of them answered “Moderately” to “Significantly”. This optimism may reflect expectations rather than lived experience, but it also suggests that confidence tends to erode once young people actually start engaging with work or a job search.

Figure 5: Likelihood of Education Preparing for the Job Market



Source: SANEM-AAB Youth Survey

In terms of career aspirations, 32% preferred government jobs followed by business or entrepreneurship (29%), work abroad (7%), private sector (6%), and academia (5%). Moreover, 13% were unwilling to engage in any kind of income generating work, of which 97% were female. 88% of those who preferred government jobs were mostly influenced by the widespread popularity of this job rather than job content or skill match. Stability, status, and social approval appear to matter more than alignment with training or experience.

To achieve such aspirations, they identified English proficiency, technical proficiency (computer and smartphone use), availability of appropriate jobs, mathematical proficiency as the most critical factors, and expressed their enthusiasm in honing these skills. Overall, they also ranked their preparation to be mostly average to good.

However, 61% of the respondents (who went to college) still do not have an updated resume, 30% do not know how to send an email, and 45% do not know how to draft a letter on a computer. As a result, those who applied for at least one job during the last 12 months, 42% of them did not make it to the viva board. More specifically, among unemployed youth, only 33 percent applied for at least one job during the past year. The share is lower among employed youth (17 percent) and students (28 percent), while just 7 percent of NEET youth applied at all. Employed youth and students perform substantially better once they apply. Looking specifically at the “sure-shot” group—those who received at

least one interview call against one application—73 percent came from employed youth and 53 percent from students, while only 12 percent were unemployed youth. This highlights a strong experience premium in the job market: youth who are already employed or still studying appear far more likely to convert applications into interviews, while fresh entrants face steep entry barriers.

These findings indicate that youth unemployment is not driven solely by lack of motivation but by structural barriers at the point of labour market entry. Without immediate interventions to access their first jobs, employability support, and transparent recruitment, a large share of educated youth will remain excluded.

Beyond traditional jobs, half of the youth are interested in freelancing or gig-based work due to its flexible working hours, independence, and opportunity of earning more. Although only 8% of youth were really engaged in such works, 60% of youths were at least aware of these activities and consider freelancing a sustainable long-term career. They also expressed challenges to begin with, such as – lack of digital skill, poor internet connection, limited English language skill, and financial solvency.

The growing interest in freelancing represents a policy opportunity that remains largely untapped; without targeted digital skills and infrastructure support, this potential employment buffer will remain inaccessible to most youth.

Additionally, 32% of youth, who never been abroad for work, would like to migrate mostly to Saudi Arabia, Italy, Malaysia, Australia, Canada and the USA for a higher standard of living amidst robust scarcity of local jobs, though 61%

Figure 6: Which of the following sectors would you most like to work in?



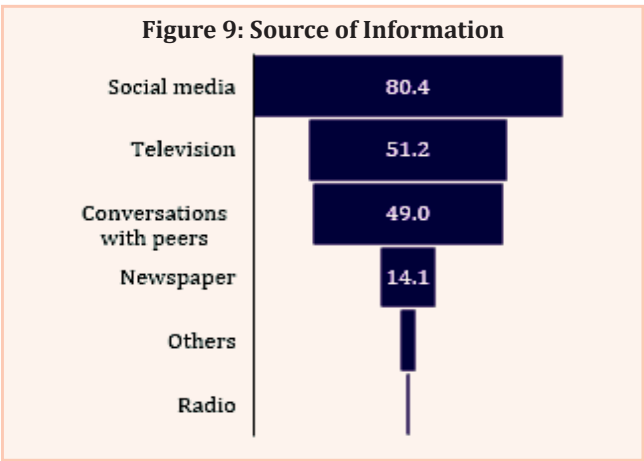
Source: SANEM-AAB Youth Survey: Phase 2; Total Sample Size: 2033

of them intend to get involved in low-skilled or semi-skilled work such as construction worker, driver, technicians etc. Furthermore, the youths who once worked abroad, the majority of them (78%) would like to do it again. Quite like freelancing, 64% of youth consider migrating abroad as a sustainable long-term career which is also filled with challenges such as – affordability, documentation issues, lack of information, and lack of a reliable mediator.

Together, these findings show that youth migration is increasingly driven by the lack of viable jobs at home. When many young people expect to migrate into low-skilled work and most returnees plan to leave again, it signals that

domestic employment and reintegration pathways are not working. Without timely action to make migration safer and better managed while improving job opportunities at home, this pattern risks turning youth mobility into a long-term loss of skills and productivity.

Youth Perception of Politics, Ongoing Reforms, and Their Priorities

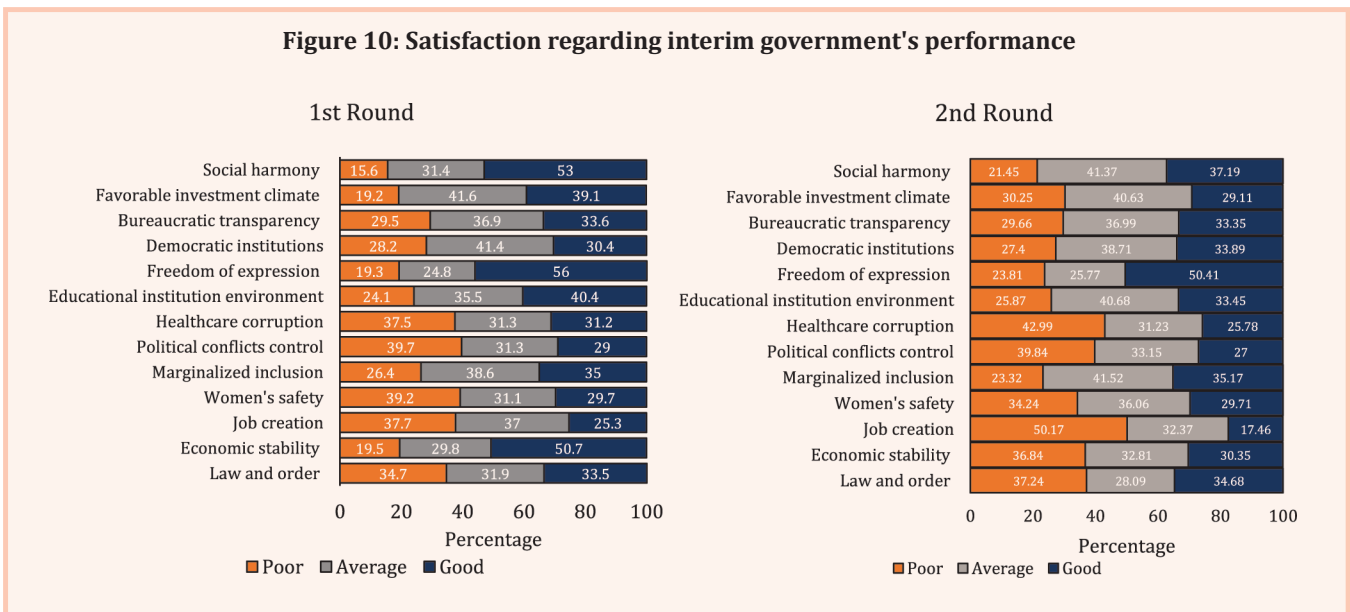


Source: SANEM-AAB Youth Survey: Phase 2

We asked, “How closely do you follow the current political scenario in Bangladesh?”, 62% of the youths responded with ‘occasionally’ to ‘very closely’ and they do so mostly through social media followed by television, conversation with peers and newspaper. They prioritise social media over traditional media because of its timeliness, diverse sources, and 24/7 accessibility along with other catchy features. However, 61% of these youths do not often verify political news they see online before considering it to be authentic, resulting in great concern as 74% of them admitted that misinformation in social media affects people’s political decisions.

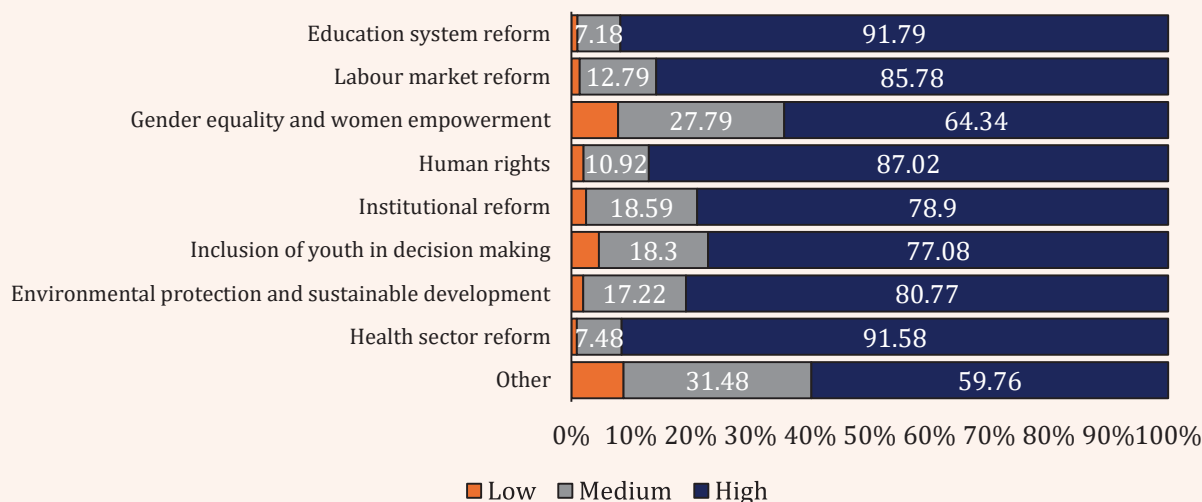
When we asked their view on established political parties, 24% did not agree that actions of these parties reflect the main issues in the country, whereas 39% agreed, and 37% remained neutral. Similarly, 34% of youths did not agree that youth-led political parties effectively represent the needs and demands of youth, whereas 43% and 23% of youths considered parties’ actions to be ‘moderately effective’ and ‘effective’ respectively. They also ranked the interim government’s performance in various aspects (Figure 10).

In the first round, upholding freedom of expression and ensuring economic stability - were the strongest performing areas while controlling political conflicts and ensuring women’s safety in public places - were the poorest performing areas of the interim government. Upholding freedom of expression remained the strongest performing area in the second round. The respondents in the second round voted for creating jobs and employment, controlling corruption in the health sector, controlling political conflicts as the poorest performances. At the same time, they expressed that they had observed an increasing trend in frequent arson, robbery and theft, mob violence/ punishment, unsafe public places (especially for women), political clashes and campus violence, unfair or politically biased arrests and legal proceedings and so on.



Source: SANEM-AAB Youth Survey

Figure 11: Youth Reform Priority Ranking

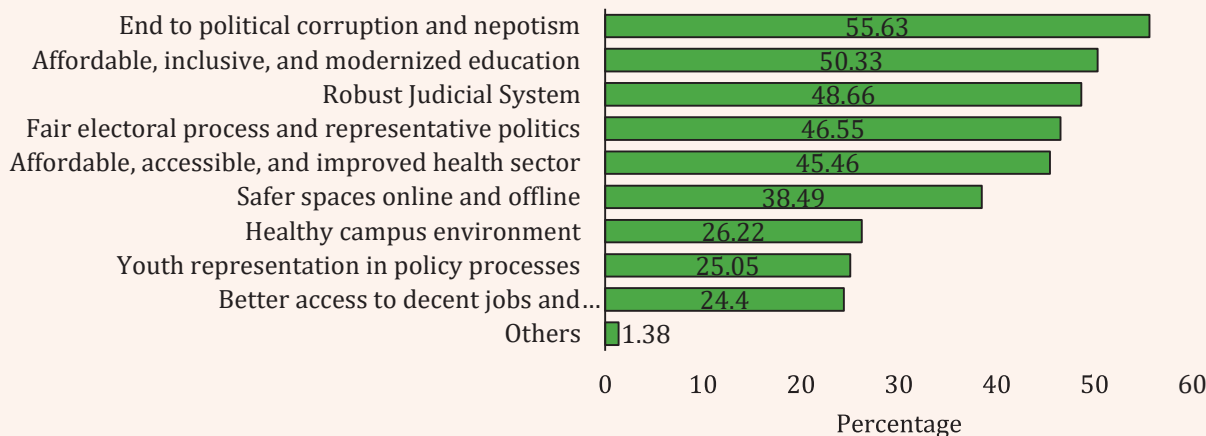


Source: SANEM-AAB Youth Survey: Phase 2

On the reforms, although 49% of the youth are aware of these reforms to some extent, only 8% of youth are moderately to very aware, whereas 51% of youth were not aware at all. We were interested to know their reform priorities, regardless of what reform initiatives have been taken so far, as 68% of youth personally held aspirations and hopes for change following the July-Movement. In response, they prioritised education system reform followed by health sector, human

rights (e.g. safety and security, freedom of expression), labour market, environmental protection and sustainable development, institutional reform, inclusion of youth in decision making, and gender equality and women empowerment (Figure 11). Specifically, they hoped for an end to political corruption and nepotism, affordable, inclusive and modernised education, robust judicial system, fair electoral process and representative politics, and so on (Figure 12).

Figure 12: Youth Aspirations following the July-Movement



Source: SANEM-AAB Youth Survey: Phase 2

Although 75% of youth consider their priority areas are reflected moderately to fully in the ongoing reform agenda, 26% of youth believe these reforms will not be implemented while 25% of youth believe otherwise, and the rest 49% of youth remain skeptical.

Ironically, despite prioritising inclusion of youth in decision making, 76% of youth were not interested in joining politics or participating in political activities. However, they seem very enthusiastic about the upcoming election, as 82% of youth have already decided that they would participate in voting and the majority of youth were ‘moderately’ to ‘fully

confident’ that the election would be free and fair. They also listed candidates’ quality (e.g. honesty, education, organisational skills) to be topmost factors for influencing their voting decision, followed by political party/election symbol, commitment to solve local problems etc.

The combination of high reform aspirations and low confidence in implementation represents a critical risk point. In a post-July context, unmet expectations may not translate into patience. Rather, it will lead to withdrawal, skepticism, or renewed unrest – particularly if youth continue to feel excluded from decision-making processes.

Takeaways for Meaningful Change

The post-July period offers a narrow but critical window to realign education, employment, and governance systems with youth expectations. Delays in addressing these gaps risk eroding the credibility of reforms and deepening youth disengagement at a moment when trust is fragile but still recoverable.

This section brings together what youth themselves see as necessary changes – not abstract reforms, but very practical shifts that could make education, work, and migration decisions less uncertain and more dignified.

Reconnecting education with real work life: What comes through clearly is that young people do not see education as useless, but they see it as incomplete. Classrooms still feel too distant from the realities of work. Curriculum reform needs to move beyond theory and certificates and instead focus on everyday skills youth actually struggle with. Such as - communication, digital confidence, problem-solving, and navigating workplaces. Exposure to internships, practical assignments, , and career guidance should not be optional; they need to be integrated as a normal part of learning. Education has to prepare youth not just to pass exams, but to function confidently in real job environments.

Making the job market more accessible for first-time entrants: Youth aspirations are high, but the entry point into the job market remains narrow and uneven. Lack of experience, weak matching between education and job requirements, and informal recruitment practices continue to block many young people before they even get a chance to prove themselves. Policy attention needs to shift toward easing this first step—through structured entry-level opportunities, transparent recruitment processes, and support for skill transition from school to work. If early job experiences remain so hard to access, frustration will continue to grow even among motivated youth.

Furthermore, when we asked about their expectations from the future government, they reiterated the importance of making a reform and improvement in Employment (40%), education (31%), agriculture (11%) and information technology (7%) sector. Additionally, for ensuring public comfort and relief, control of commodity prices (38%), improvement of law and order and prevention of terrorism (30%), job creation (27%) were prioritised the most. For a meaningful change in the future, the young people emphasised the importance of good governance and democracy, social harmony, political reform and economic stability.

Taken altogether, youth priorities consistently converge around four domains: employment, education, governance, and safety – particularly for women and minorities.

Democracy and Political Reform <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Ensure democracy and democratic values• Free and fair elections with participation of all political parties• End political violence• Consider public opinions and sentiments in decision-making• Possibility of new political leadership or parties	Employment and Economic Stability <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Reduce unemployment, especially among youth• Control inflation to ease cost of living• Create fair and sustainable economic opportunities	Social Harmony and Awareness <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Promote social awareness among citizens• Arrange dialogues to build social harmony• Ensure freedom of expression• Encourage citizens to remain vigilant and responsible	Rule of Law and Good Governance <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Strict governance and proper implementation of laws• Rule of law must be ensured for all• Passing laws is not enough; effective enforcement is essential• Government must remain neutral in ensuring safety and justice
Law Enforcement and Public Safety <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Strong and vigilant law enforcement agencies• Police must be more active and responsible• Local representatives (Union chairmen and members) must be proactive• Constant vigilance to prevent crime• Installation of CCTV cameras for public safety	Women's Safety and Empowerment <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Ensure a safe society for women• Equal rights for women in all sectors• Expand employment opportunities for women• Ensure safety at educational institutions and workplaces	Protection of Minorities <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Stop violence against religious and ethnic minorities• Ensure equal rights and opportunities regardless of religion• Improve the judicial system to protect minorities• Ensure safety and justice for all minority communities	Accountability and Anti - Corruption <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Accountability in all walks of life• Reduce corruption across all sectors• Ensure honesty in bureaucratic processes• Reduce corruption in the education sector• Honest and responsible political leadership

References

Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics. (2022). Population and housing census 2022: Preliminary report. Statistics and Informatics Division, Ministry of Planning, Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh.

Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics. (2025). Quarterly Labour force survey 2024. Statistics and Informatics Division, Ministry of Planning, Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh.

General Economics Division (GED). (2020). 8th Five Year Plan | July 2020—June 2025. Bangladesh Planning Commission, Ministry of Planning.

This policy brief is written by Dr Selim Raihan, Ekramul Hasan, Shafa Tasneem from SANEM. Guidance and editorial support by Nazmul Ahsan, Tamazer Ahmed, Zohora Binte Zaman Bony, and Masrur Abdul Quader from ActionAid Bangladesh.