

# Addressing the Vulnerability of Young People in Bangladesh: Policy and Resource Allocation

## BACKGROUND

With 27.82%<sup>1</sup> population representing young people, Bangladesh is currently experiencing a demographic window of opportunity. If this opportunity is to be translated into a demographic dividend, young people must participate meaningfully in the national economy. However, young people in Bangladesh face multiple vulnerabilities - including limited access to internet services, dropout from the formal education system, and marginalisation of people with disabilities.

The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated the pre-existing vulnerabilities as well as created new ones. Closures of educational institutions had led to higher dropout rates, worsened mental health conditions, and created academic session jams. The global economic crisis in the context of the post-COVID recovery, as well as the Russia and Ukraine war, might have a significant adverse impact on the employment of young people as well as on their financial securities, leading to the emergence of a new vulnerable population group known as the 'new poor'. This set of phenomena eventually fuelled higher rates of inequality and marginalisation, manifested through increased rate of child marriage, suicide, gender-based violence and juvenile offenses.

The entirety of the challenges being discussed disproportionately affects young people specially who are female, marginalised, residing in remote climate vulnerable areas, or come from lower socio-economic backgrounds. Therefore, reaping the benefits of the demographic dividend might require identifying possible causes of vulnerability of young people and ensuring necessary policy and resource allocation to address them.

In this context, this study highlights five major dimensions of the vulnerability of the young people in Bangladesh, focusing on the areas of education, digital service, employment, health, and social deviance, which might help identify the more vulnerable groups. Moreover, it also tries stocktaking of the key government policies to identify the vulnerability of young people and identify ways for necessary resource allocation in the budget to implement the government policies for young people.



## EDUCATION AND DIGITAL SERVICE

Despite significant increases in literacy rates over the past decades, education remains vulnerable due to challenges like lack of quality education and inequality in accessing education. The young people from disadvantaged groups such as female young people, non-binary or transgender young people, young people with disabilities, young people from poor households, or hard-to-reach areas including those residing in char, haor, Chittagong hill tracts (CHT), or climate vulnerable areas are still being deprived of higher education opportunities, as a larger percentage of them get dropped out after primary education. In terms of the quality of education, the common perception, as well as the harsh reality, is that the education system does not adequately equip students with employable skills due to poor quality of education. In addition, access to quality education is also highly correlated with the socio-economic status of young people. This indicates marginalised young people are more likely to get deprived of quality education. Moreover, the disparity in terms of digital literacy or access to technical training exacerbates the risks for these marginalised young people. Often due to the lack of information about the government service (i.e., training), they are deprived of such facilities. In addition, the grassroots young women lag behind in accessing the digital services due to the social barriers arising from traditional socio-cultural norms.

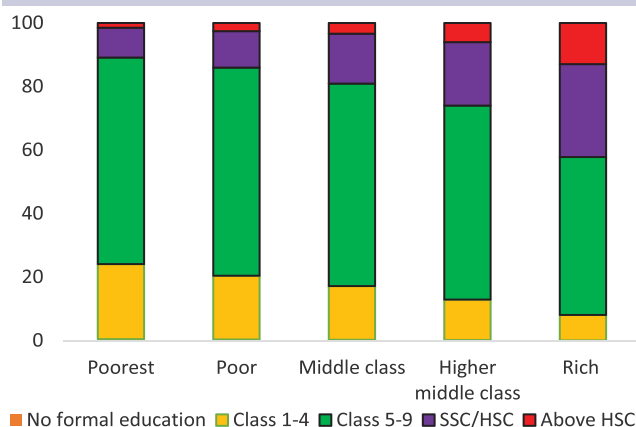
<sup>1</sup><https://en.prothomalo.com/bangladesh/o9i009req1>

**Table 1: Level of education among young people who are not students (Percent)**

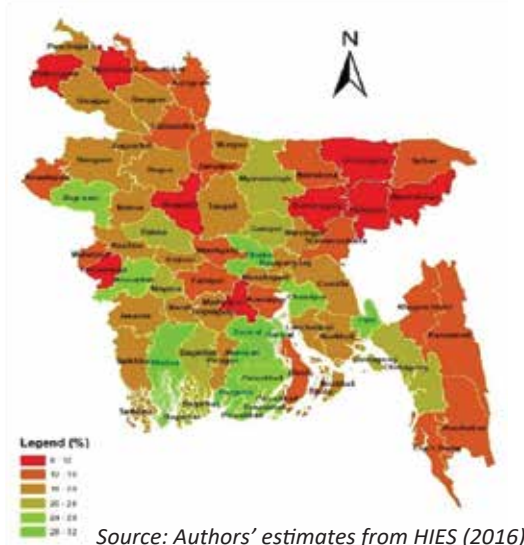
Education level	Male	Female	Total
No formal education	0.31	0.23	0.26
Class 1-4	19.51	13.57	16.23
Class 5-9	57.31	64.16	61.1
SSC/HSC	15.87	18.16	17.14
Above HSC	6.99	3.88	5.27

Source: Authors' estimates from HIES (2016)

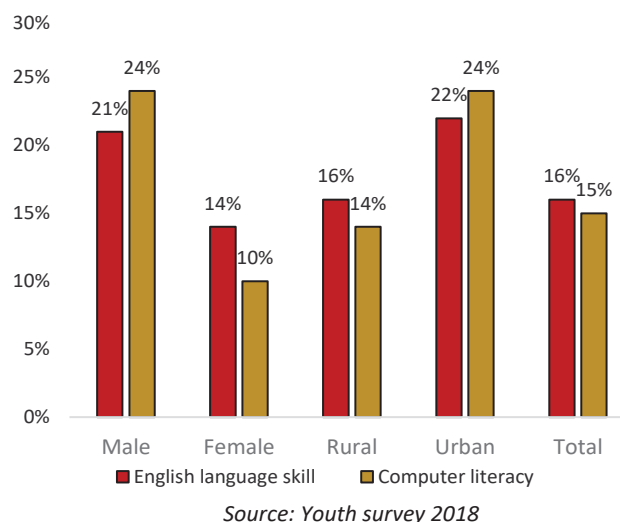
**Figure 1: Socio-economic status and level of education. A larger percentage of the young people (non-students) from relatively richer households is receiving higher education- one percent from the poorest households while 13 percent from richer households.**



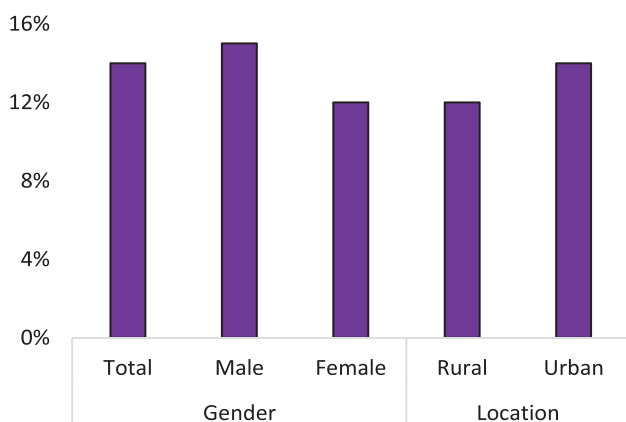
**Figure 2: A smaller percentage of young people (non-student) from some hard-to-reach or poverty-prone areas such as Nilphamary, Thakurgaon, Sunamganj, Habiganj, and Chittoogram hill tracts districts have higher education.**



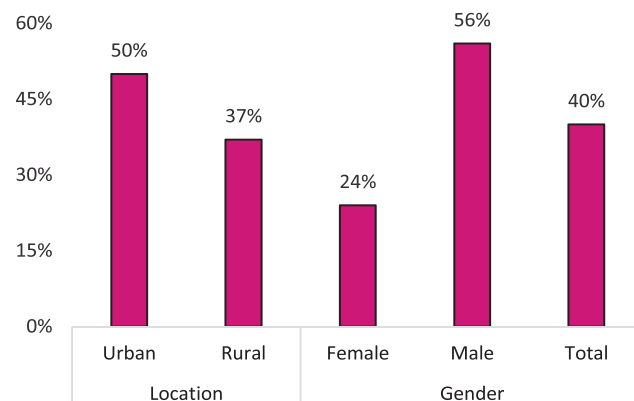
**Figure 3: There is a gender and spatial divide in terms of percentage of young people having satisfactory (Good/Very Good) English language skills or computer literacy skills.**



**Figure 4: Percentage of young people with vocational training by gender and location**



**Figure 5: Percentage of young people having internet access by gender and location**



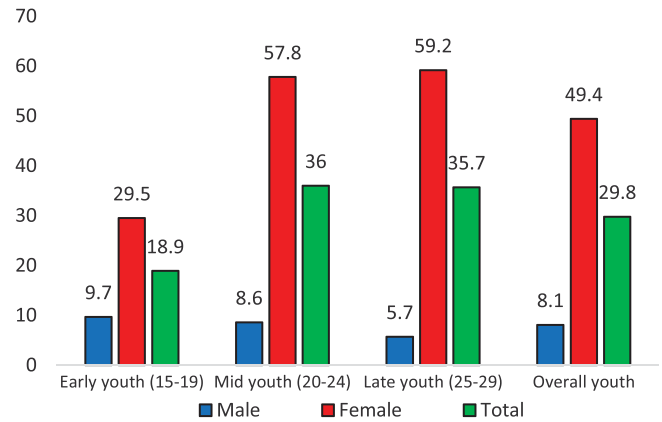
# EMPLOYMENT

**Table 2: Young people unemployed as % of total unemployed**

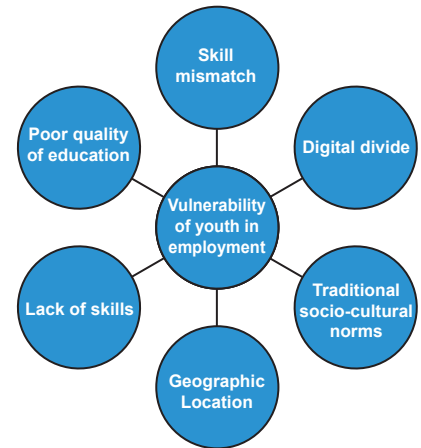
Education	Male	Female	Total
None	2.6	5.5	4
Primary	11.6	11.8	11.7
Secondary	25.6	30.4	28
Higher Secondary	24.4	20.1	22.3
Tertiary	15.5	11.2	13.4
<b>Total young people</b>	<b>80.2</b>	<b>79</b>	<b>79.6</b>

Source: Authors' estimates from Labour Force Survey (2016-2017)

**Figure 6: Young people Not in Employment, Education or Training (NEET) by age category (% of total)**

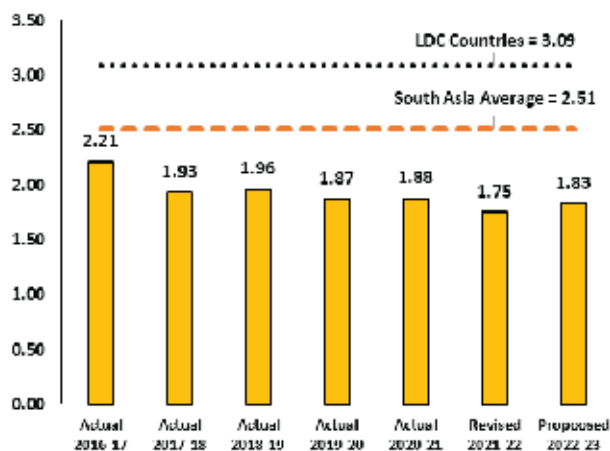


In terms of employment, unemployment of young people and young people not being in education, employment, and in training (NEET) are two major concerns. The vulnerability of young people in employment is closely linked to education and skills development. The deprivation of young people from education and training might make them vulnerable in the labour market. Furthermore, gaining higher education does not necessarily ensure a job in Bangladesh due to skill mismatch or poor quality of education, leading to very high unemployment rate among educated young people. However, in both cases, young people from marginalised groups are more likely to be vulnerable in the labour market as a greater percentage of them are deprived of quality education, training, or digital services. This might have long-term effects on the economy as inequality in opportunities breeds inequality in income, and eventually, that translates to inequality in wealth.



However, the government has undertaken several strategies to address the vulnerability of young people in education and employment, by improving the quality of education, and training and ensuring equity in terms of access. Nonetheless, such strategies often face serious implementation challenges particularly due to the lack of necessary resource allocation and its proper utilisation.

**Figure 7: Education Budget (as % of GDP)**



Source: Authors' interpretation from MoF data

**Figure 8: Government initiatives in the budget of FY 22-23 for employment of young people**

Ensuring overseas employment of 0.81 million Bangladeshi workers by providing training to 0.52 million workers.

A number of fiscal measures in the form of tax exemptions have been proposed

Establishment of 5 Training centers, 1 Fashion Design, 2 Market Promotion Institutes under Handloom Board

Technology Empowerment Centre for Underprivileged Rural Young People

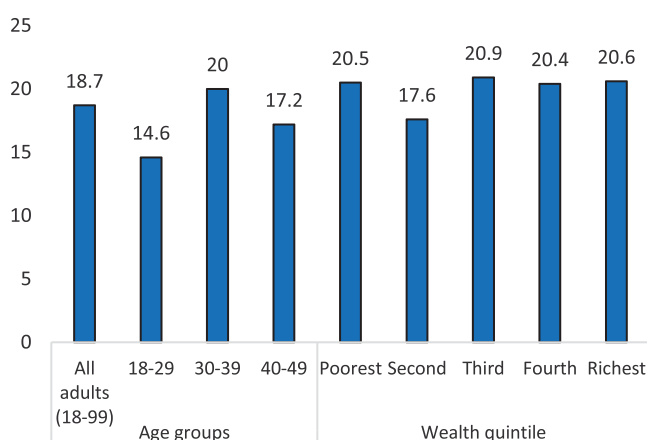
Plans to raise ICT-based employment to 3 million by 2025

Source: Authors' compilation from budget speech of FY 2022-23

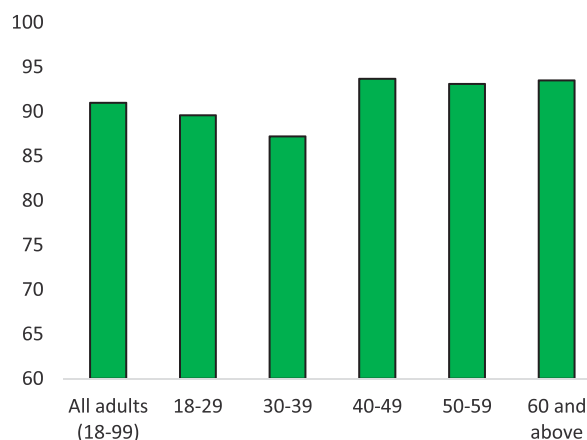
## HEALTH

Mental health and sexual & reproductive health are two major concerns for the young people of Bangladesh. The COVID-19 pandemic has wreaked havoc on the mental health of the Bangladeshi population. There has been a rise in suicide rates amongst young people in Bangladesh during the COVID-19 pandemic. According to a recent survey of Achol foundation, 364 students committed suicides in the first eight months of 2022 where most of them were aged between 13 and 20.<sup>2</sup> Despite the growing mental health problems, the mental healthcare facilities in Bangladesh are still inadequate leading to a significantly high treatment gap for mental illness. Only 0.49% of the healthcare workers in Bangladesh are trained in providing mental health services and there are only 0.16 psychiatrists per 100,000 populations (WHO, 2020). Although the government plans to streamline the mental healthcare facilities in Bangladesh, there is no specific allocation for mental health in the budget of Bangladesh yet.

**Figure 9: Prevalence of mental disorder by age and wealth quintile (%)**



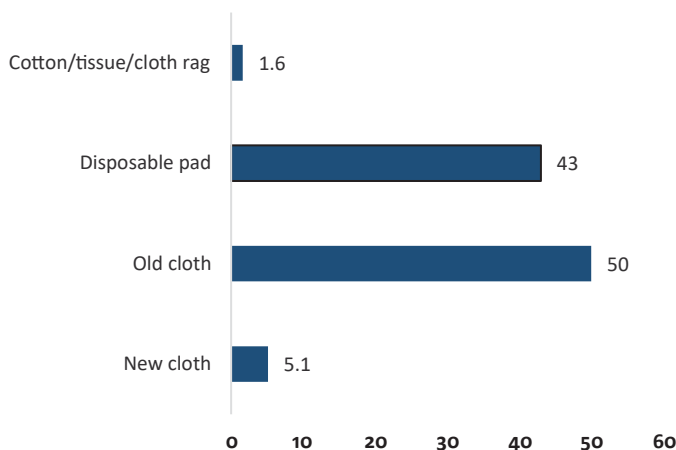
**Figure 10: Treatment gap for mental illness for age groups (%)**



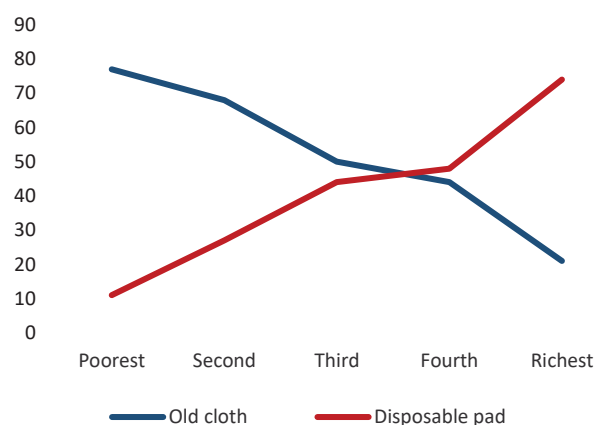
Source: National Mental Health Survey 2019

On the other hand, adolescents face tremendous challenges in meeting their sexual and reproductive health (SRH) related issues because of a lack of awareness about puberty, sexuality, and basic human biological changes. According to the national hygiene survey (2019), only 36% of adolescent girls reported that they heard about menstruation before their first menstruation. These underlying factors lead to high rates of early pregnancy, sexually transmitted infections (STIs), sexual violence, limited negotiation skills, forced marriage, and high fertility rates.

**Figure 11: Materials used by adolescents during menstruation (%)**



**Figure 12: Old cloth and pad used during menstruation by wealth quintile (%)**

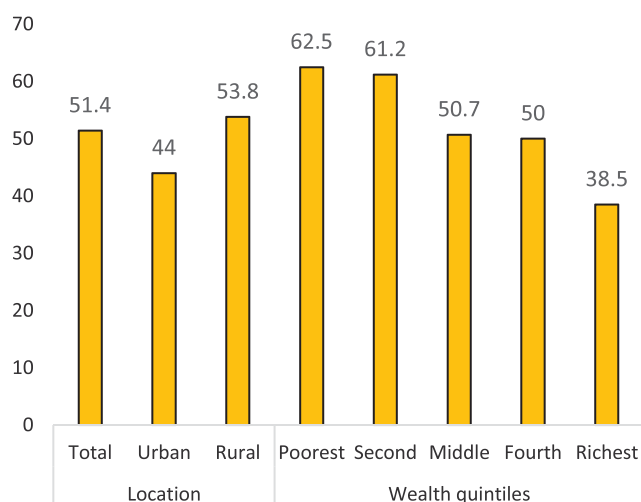


Source: National Hygiene Survey 2018

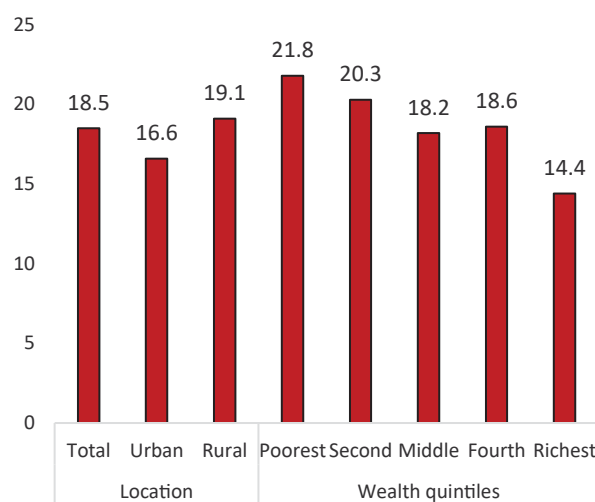
<sup>2</sup><https://www.tbsnews.net/bangladesh/364-students-committed-suicide-last-8-months-survey-492946>

Child marriage and associated teenage pregnancy and fertility are the two pressing issues about SRH that affect young people. Although there is a national plan of action to end child marriage, the recent pandemic-induced crisis led to a significant increase in child marriage. Moreover, although the government has a commitment to ensuring the reproductive health of adolescents, VAT has been imposed on the import of raw materials used for producing sanitary napkins. This step will potentially make menstruation hygiene inaccessible to the marginalised groups.

**Figure 13: Percentage of women aged 20-24 who got married before age 18**



**Figure 14: Percentage of women aged 15-19 who have had a live birth or are pregnant with their first child**



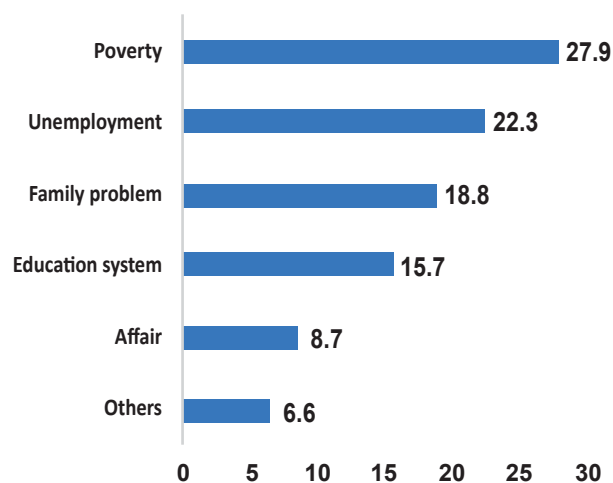
Source: Authors' estimates from Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys (MICS) 2019

## SOCIAL DEVIATION

Last but not the least, a major source of the vulnerability of young people is social deviation. In the present context, the juvenile offense has turned into a major concern in Bangladesh. The number of young people involved in anti-social activities appears to be on the rise. The rising teen gangs in urban areas are a major concern that commits petty crimes, as well as some serious offenses like mugging, drug abuse, murder, etc. The new manifestations of juvenile offenses include gang activities, purposeless offenses, acts of vandalism, joy-riding, eve-teasing, and militancy. Poverty, unemployment, and family problem are cited as the main causes of the criminal activities of the young people.

The social deviance of the young people is also linked to their vulnerability in education or employment. The presence of a large number of NEET or unemployed young people might potentially raise criminal activity among youth. This social deviance originating from a lack of opportunities for the young people is a major risk to social cohesion in Bangladesh.

**Figure 15: Causes of youth criminal activity (%)**



Source: Uddin (2020)

## RECOMMENDATIONS

### **The education for the vulnerable young people should be prioritised**

To ensure that young people enter the workforce with employable skills, the government needs to address the problem of unequal access to education. In addition, the opportunities for quality education should be decentralised to reach the young people from hard-to-reach areas or marginalised groups. In this regard, the government and NGOs should focus on the disadvantaged groups' educational needs, ensuring balanced educational development in all regions. Moreover, given that such groups often have less access to digital platforms, special attention to the accessibility of these left-behind groups to digital platforms is very much needed to engage them in the inclusive development agenda.

### **The government expenditure on skill development and education for young people should be prioritised**

Although the government has a specific strategy to improve the quality of education as well as make education more inclusive, the inadequate resource allocation, as well as its inefficient utilisation makes such policies ineffective. Therefore, at first, the government needs to prioritise spending on education in its development agenda. Second, within the education sector, it is inevitable to prioritise spending on technical and vocational education that might help the young people achieve the necessary skills. Third, the government needs to spend more on ensuring quality market-oriented-skill-based education for marginalised young people. Finally, the government should promote public expenditure accountability in a participatory manner to improve the quality of education and educational infrastructures.

### **The access of marginalised groups to digital service and quality training needs to be ensured**

To ensure the young women and marginalised groups' participation in training, the government must ensure that the training has market demand, the training institutes are easily accessible to the people and these vulnerable groups are aware of such training facilities. The quality of the training needs assessment to be improved as well. It would require upgrading the existing training equipment, assessing the market demand, re-training the instructors, as well as campaigning on the existing training programmes on offer.

### **Comprehensive coordination is needed among the different stakeholders working for vulnerable young people**

The ministries working for the development of marginalised young people must coordinate their initiatives to identify the effectiveness of their initiatives. Moreover, they should consult with the young people to understand their aspirations. In addition, a comprehensive partnership between private and public sectors might help address the vulnerability of young people.

### **The mental health care facilities should be streamlined**

Given the high prevalence of mental health issues and the treatment gap, mental health should be given more emphasis in the government's development plan. To address the high

treatment gap, establishing a mental health facility, including a facility for substance use, in secondary level health services is essential. Moreover, since stigmas, unfavourable attitudes, and poor health-seeking behaviour in relation to mental health disorders are widely prevalent in society, it is also necessary to revise the high school curriculum and implement mental health literacy programmes.

### **A revamped/ renewed focus is needed to end child marriage**

It is obvious that our hard own gains in reducing child marriage have been facing serious threats in the context of COVID-19 induced crisis. Bangladesh has the target of ending child marriage by 2041. However, achieving such a target might require even harder efforts from the relevant stakeholders. Therefore, to protect young girls from child marriage, a greater budget must be allocated. Moreover, digitising marriage registration and making it accessible to all or preventing unlawful manipulation in birth registration might also help reduce the incidence of child marriage.

### **The government should focus on ensuring the sexual and reproductive health of young people**

In order to ensure the sexual and reproductive health care of the female young people, it is necessary to increase access of marginalised groups to reproductive and adolescent-friendly health services through the frontline health personnel. Moreover, it is also necessary to make menstruation hygiene materials more accessible to them by removing all kinds of taxes on such products. Finally, creating changes in the behaviour of the protectors (i.e., parents and teachers) of adolescents might also help ensure their reproductive health. Therefore, initiatives should be taken to promote mass awareness on sexual and reproductive health (SRH) to reduce prejudice around SRH.

### **Special focus is needed to address the vulnerability of young people of climate vulnerable regions**

Climate change and associated disasters have added a new dimension to the vulnerability of young people in Bangladesh. Young people from disaster-prone areas are deprived of basic government services due to the lack of information or the absence of such services. Therefore, the government needs to ensure adequate public service infrastructure in the climate vulnerable areas which are more prone to climate induced disasters as well as ensure the participation of young people in such services.

*This policy brief is jointly developed by SANEM and ActionAid Bangladesh. The authors are Dr.Selim Raihan and Sakil Ahmmad*

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