



Seminar on

HARNESSING BANGLADESH'S YOUTH DIVIDEND: FUTURE IMPERATIVES IN A CHANGING WORLD

30 JULY 2025



Organised by

Bangladesh Institute of International and Strategic Studies (BISS)
Dept. of Global Studies and Governance (GSG), Independent University, Bangladesh (IUB)



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Proceedings on

Harnessing Bangladesh's Youth Dividend: Future Imperatives in a Changing World

Bangladesh Institute of International and Strategic Studies (BIISS) and Department of Global Studies (GSG), Independent University Bangladesh (IUB) jointly organised a seminar titled '**Harnessing Bangladesh's Youth Dividend: Future Imperatives in a Changing World**' on Wednesday, 30 July 2025 at the IUB auditorium, Dhaka. **H E Mr Ghanshyam Bhandari**, Ambassador of Nepal to the People's Republic of Bangladesh graced the seminar as the Chief Guest. **Dr Md Nazrul Islam**, Secretary (East and West), Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh was the Special Guest of the seminar. **Ambassador A F M Gousal Azam Sarker**, Chairman of BIISS, was the Session Chair of the Inaugural Session of the seminar. The seminar began with the welcome addresses of the Director General of BIISS, **Major General Iftekhar Anis, BSP, awc, afwc, psc, PEng** and **Dr Md Shanawez Hossain**, Associate Professor, Department of Global Studies and Governance (GSG), IUB. The keynote paper titled 'Instilling Couth into Our Youth' was presented by **Dr Imtiaz A Hussain**, Professor of GSG, IUB. After that, the Special Guest delivered his remarks. Thereafter, the Chief Guest delivered his valuable speech. Finally, the Session Chair, **Ambassador A F M Gousal Azam Sarker** delivered the concluding remarks. Senior officials from different ministries, former diplomats, senior military officials, representatives from media, researchers, academics, and students from various universities, representatives from different think tanks, and international organisations participated in the seminar and enriched it by presenting their valuable opinions, comments, suggestions, and observations during the open discussion session.



Welcome Address



Major General Iftekhar Anis, BSP, awc, afwc, psc, PEng

Director General

Bangladesh Institute of International and Strategic Studies (BIISS)

In the welcome address, Major General Iftekhar Anis said the event came at a crucial time when Bangladesh stood at the threshold of a demographic opportunity. With over half of its population under the age of 30, the youth—full of energy, creativity, and potential—represented the nation’s heartbeat. If this demographic strength could be channelled in the right direction, Bangladesh would have the possibility to unlock a powerful engine for inclusive growth, innovation, resilience, and strategic global engagement. Today’s gathering brought scholars, policymakers, diplomats, entrepreneurs, youth leaders, and students together under one roof, not only to discuss the promise of Bangladesh’s youth but also to collectively reimagine the structures and strategies needed for supporting their journey forward. He pointed out that aim of the seminar was not only to celebrate this potential, but also reflect on what must be done—by the country’s institutions, policymakers, and communities—to truly harness this youth dividend. General Anis then elaborated on the seminar’s sessions and what they would focus on; he expressed hope that speakers and panellists would provide useful insights and practical ideas that would in turn help to guide Bangladesh’s policies and enrich national dialogue on youth empowerment. BIISS believed policy and strategy must be informed by inclusive discourse and policy-relevant research; this seminar was part of its continued commitment to promoting informed dialogue on national and international issues that mattered for Bangladesh’s future. HE was hopeful that the discussions would generate fresh insights, bold ideas, and practical recommendations that could shape future policies and institutional frameworks. A comprehensive seminar report and subsequent publication would help ensure the conversations continue to influence national thinking long after this event concludes. He concluded the address by thanking IUB for their valuable collaboration—time, expertise and enthusiasm. He suggested the use of the platform to engage, inspire, and shape a future where Bangladesh’s youth should lead from the front with purpose, pride, global vision, and urged all to engage efforts to develop this as a space of inspiration, critical thought and meaningful exchange.

Keynote Presentation: Instilling Couth into Our Youth



Dr Imtiaz A Hussain

Professor

Department of Global Studies and Governance (GSG)

Independent University, Bangladesh (IUB)

Dr Imtiaz A Hussain was the keynote presenter of the seminar. The seminar was deliberately aimed at Bangladesh's youthful population; "youthful" meant more sophisticated? But how to do that? Here, he discussed about three points: 1) the first would basically explain an inherited, continuing problem; 2) second would push the organisers into direction they initiated and resolve taking what they were doing. The first one was academia-industry partnership. There were two reasons at least, one of which was secular. Certainly, there was competition going on in Bangladesh against social media. This was taking too much time, space and there was a need of doing something about it. The second was rapid changes in technology. This was not the 19th or 20th century, with steel, RMG and other things. To prepare for dealing with changes, he proposed to address all these and see what could be done in that regard. Dr Hussain was informed of some problems Bangladeshi youth were facing. Basic skills like reading, writing, arithmetic were not up to the mark, and that could be seen at classes he and others were taking in IUB. This was not high-school training; if social media was communicating with someone, and that person grabbed completely, then how could the hard work be built, i.e., knowledge building? Third thing was work ethic, which could be seen in people losing the sense of punctuality; learning the ropes (i.e., learn the procedures, rules, details of a specific job or task) was too a missing ingredient. What could be done about it? One way Dr Hussain and others were doing at IUB was taking classroom knowledge to confront the country's problems. The best example of that would be their errors becoming like the law of diminishing return in trajectory. Some reports that were submitted were of below-par quality, resulting in not receiving citations or publication. When IUB was founded, it ranked among the top universities in Bangladesh, but nowadays, it is facing challenges in staying among the top 10. One proposal to change this had already begun, albeit in fits and starts, by the School of Environmental and Life Sciences (SELS); it was a good start. Dr Hussain also liked to propose something else they had been doing, in addition to Dr Rabbani, the dean of SELS, there was Professor

Mamun Habib from the School of Business Environment. For a period of over nine months, they had been looking into the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). He asked if they were actually there at this point. The good thing was they had 11 chapters, but there were interests elsewhere to present those as people outside would notice them. However, the best part is that they were adults, albeit the theme was youth, and there were three students with upcoming chapters. First was Nazifa, then Yazdi; Nazifa worked on river governance, Yazdi worked for transforming the very dirty shipbuilding industry of Bangladesh, and the third person, Rubayat, a student with major in environment and minor with the GSG, had quite a bit of work to her name; in addition, eliciting undergraduate writings for publications. Another student, Cynthia, had also done a lot of work on thesis concerning the Karnaphuli river, which was competing with the Buriganga. There was the president of global gatekeepers, Sohrab. Here, Dr. Hussain said, when Sohrab would complete corrections for his chapter, it was quite likely he would be back. Mr. Sohrab was the only person in the university involved in plastic removal from St. Martin's Island.

These were huge developments and trademarks, which were the third point. How to carry these into the international arena or global attention? The first thing was faculty and student exchange. In 2025, Dr Hussain and Nazifa were invited to the International Studies Association Conference in Huatulco, Mexico. They also visited the two MOUs they had with two Mexican universities. Best part was Nazifa was mingling and mixing so much with other students there, Dr Hussain thought they had another good channel opening up with a continent with whom they did not have any relationship. When he was in Mexico last week, Cynthia wrote him another note asking if he could bring some books for her. When Dr Hussain asked her if those books would be in Spanish or English, she replied Spanish, and it was very pleasing for him. This was like probing the frontier he would like to propose others, develop and also do it. As for takeaways, he suggested that for the consolidation of audiences' ideas,



deepen them, control social media time and attachment, parents should stay abreast of the latest tech; if today's youth would double their age now, they would be doing what their parents were now doing: searching for job for their children.

Speech by the Special Guest



Dr Md Nazrul Islam

Secretary (East and West)
Ministry of Foreign Affairs
Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh

Dr Md Nazrul Islam started his speech with the comment that the country was in the midst of the first anniversary of the Great July Uprising of 2024, called it a turning point in Bangladesh's recent history and paid tributes to those wounded or left with lifelong disabilities in their pursuit of justice, dignity and democratic values. There was a profound symbolism in the coincidence of these two events, i.e., the anniversary and organising the seminar; the seminar was a youth-led initiative, a national conversation between the promise and potential of the country's young population. This alignment provided the powerful platform to reflect on them, their aspirations, challenges and most importantly, potential in a world undergoing rapid transformations. He said some points from Dr Hussain's speech would be repeated in his speech too. For someone like Dr Islam's age, who had served in the form of both prospects and pressures facing the country's young generation, not only in Bangladesh, but also around the world, and based on that experience, he highlighted a few areas that were real challenges. There was a need of addressing these issues head-on if Bangladesh wanted to harness the full potential of its youth population. First imperative should be to rethink education to prepare the youth for the world designed for a different era. It once served the needs of bureaucracies and factories, but that world was long gone. Today's Bangladeshi youth are in need of something different: they would need critical thinking, solving real-world problems, coding, and competing with the world. That would also mean updating the curricula of schools and universities in Bangladesh. There was a need of teaching digital skills, financial literacy, civic values and climate awareness as part of everyday learning and educational training, especially in future-ready sectors like artificial intelligence, green energy, robotics and healthcare; education must be inclusive. That would mean reaching every remote village, whether they were living with a disability or came from a backward community. The performance of Bangladeshi youth in different global competitions clearly proved their potentials. Second imperative should be creating jobs and a space for young entrepreneurs. As Professor Hussain highlighted, academic and industry linkages should be there. Dr Islam worked with certain job creations for the country's youth, and they could focus on ICT, semiconductor, pharmaceuticals, agro-processing, logistics and shipbuilding. Third issue was that, given climate change was a prominent phenomenon and Bangladesh had long been at the forefront of this, the youth should put climate resilience on their agenda. It was known that Bangladesh was facing the impacts of climate change, but attention should be given to devise solutions; from clean energy to sustainable agriculture, there were green jobs waiting to be created, and young people could lead the way. According to Dr Islam, as a diplomat, the fourth imperative was global partnership, as said by Dr Hussain, partnership with the international community. Youth engagement

was not just a domestic issue, but also part of Bangladesh's foreign policy agenda, including development initiatives and safe migration pathways. Bangladesh has been advocating for more youth voices in UN fora, climate negotiations and regional partnerships. Transnational youth were being explored, whose futures were linked. According to Dr Islam, digital inclusion was one key part of this whole ecosystem and governance. Much work remains for narrowing the gap in access to fast, affordable internet, digital fluency, from basic computing to AI and cybersecurity; ethical technology use must be in diverse, undeserved areas and positioning Bangladesh as a hub for remote work and freelancing would unlock new opportunities for the country's youth. Where should Bangladesh go from here? The truth was unlocking the power of its national mission that belonged to all people in the country. Its young people are not waiting on the sidelines; instead, they were already leading, creating, building; here, Dr Islam asked the audience to imagine what they could actually do if provided with the tools, trust and space to thrive, better education, better access. The future was not far off. It was already knocking and looked like a 22-year-old coder, a climate activist, a village entrepreneur, a young volunteer, and people should believe in them. He concluded by saying there was no limit to where Bangladesh could go, because when Bangladesh's youth would rise, so would the nation.



Speech by the Chief Guest



H E Mr Ghanshyam Bhandari

Ambassador of Nepal to the People's Republic of Bangladesh

H E Ghanshyam Bhandari began his speech by thanking both organisers, because what they were doing was the first of its kind, and secondly, for bringing an important theme of harnessing the youth dividend to the fore. He shared some personal thoughts on how not only within the domestic context of Nepal and Bangladesh, but also as a strategic resource for strengthening bilateral cooperation. Whenever he would begin in front of professionals, there would be a small caveat: whenever someone would listen to speeches of ambassadors or diplomats, those were the most boring and structured ones, as they would speak within the setting. Ambassador Bhandari here highlighted some points: according to one of the latest estimates, the global population belonging to the age bracket of 10-24 years constituted a large number, making them one of the largest demographic groups worldwide. Young people were not only the leaders who would save the collective future of countries; yet, across many developing countries, including Nepal and Bangladesh, but millions of them also still faced poverty, inequality and human rights challenges, limiting their ability to grow. About 515 million youth were living on less than US\$ 2 per day, with many more lacking accesses to quality education, decent work and justice. As per the 2021 national census of Nepal, the youth were 16 to 40 years and constituted over 40 per cent of the total population. In Bangladesh, that was 43 per cent. Both countries had vibrant, ambitious and globally connected youth. This presented a huge youth bulge, but it was not just an opportunity. Both nations should, therefore, work together to equip their youth for leading towards bringing transformational changes in their respective societies and bilateral cooperation. Towards that end, first and foremost, priority should be given to development and innovation.

When young people have access to policy landscape and are better represented in politics, they can bring fresh ideas and confront challenges. Embracing youth and ensuring their inclusion would pave the way for societal and national growth, with them being at the forefront. UN Security Council Resolution Policy of 2015 and 2021 reflected this vision with priorities centred around participation, protection, particularly highlighted in the 2015 resolution. Here, the speaker recognised the similar focus placed on the participation of youth by the Bangladesh government. It must be ensured that youth are represented at the table, not just as beneficiaries of policies, but also as co-creators. This would mean devising inclusive policies that would support leadership. Young people were not only job seekers, but also job creators, as highlighted by the keynote presenter and the special guest. Ambassador Bhandari urged for starting with areas like fintech, agribusiness, and tourism. Bangladesh is building a strong digital economy, a robust economy driven by its young innovators, with a focus on digital innovation, climate action, and social justice. As Nepal and Bangladesh were preparing to graduate from

the Least Developed Country (LDC) category by 2026, youth would be key to sustaining the progress made so far and ensuring the graduation would become a smooth, sustainable and irreversible one. He said the seminar being held was more inclusive, digital and people-centred. Young people with global mindsets, technological skills, and awareness of global issues had a vital role. Advocates of sustainable development, climate negotiators, human rights champions, and agents of soft power brought fresh energy and insights to foreign policy processes, setups and digital platforms. They could tell stories better and save global narratives for their countries in new, innovative ways. He also said these three driving factors were two in fact: economic partnership and people-to-people connectivity, which were quite high between the people of both nations. Youth played a vital role in realising these expectations for both sides. There were Nepalese students studying in two different universities and various colleges across Bangladesh, while nearly 50,000 Bangladeshi tourists visit Nepal every year. These people, students, youth, tourists, institutions like this university (IUB) and other academic think tanks, various other research institutes, could lead to youth exchanges and build an academic partnership of mutual cooperation. The future would belong to those who could adapt, innovate, and collaborate. Hence, there must be investment in a youth-led partnership to shape the collective future together.



There was no reason to fear the wind, and especially so, when the roots of Nepal-Bangladesh relationship were so deep, and the changes they had coming in the form of the leaders towards their shared goals. Finally, Ambassador Bhandari urged young participants present in the hall to remember, which was the easiest thing for an ambassador, to be preachy and moralistic, to say one was not only defined by his/her background, where that person came from, how s/he would be labelled or defined by the society, but also by their aspirations and follow the set formulas for success. True fulfilment would come from carving one's own path, with purpose and perseverance. He also suggested to collaborate more than ever before in today's world. Because, in the long run, people would not remember someone for the answers s/he wrote in exams, the marks they got in tests, presentation, PowerPoint presentation, slides they prepared, but for their kindness, humility, and willingness to collaborate; relations and care would matter the most, according to him. He concluded the speech by saying,

“নেপাল ও বাংলাদেশের মধ্যে বন্ধুত্বপূর্ণ, হিমালয় এবং বঙ্গোপসাগরের মধ্যে প্রবাহিত নদীগুলোর মতো প্রাকৃতিক যোগসূত্র রয়েছে; আমাদের সমাজ এবং জনগণ এক্ষেত্রে উলেখযোগ্য ভূমিকা পালন করছে। তরুণরা কেবল উন্নয়নের সুবিধাভোগী নয়, বরং পরিবর্তনের সক্রিয় প্রতিনিধি। আমাদের যুবসমাজের শক্তি ও সৃজনশীলতাকে উভয় দেশের সমাজ ও জনগণের উন্নয়নের জন্য ব্যবহার করতে হবে।”

Remarks by the Session Chair



Ambassador A F M Gousal Azam Sarker

Chairman

Bangladesh Institute of International and Strategic Studies (BIISS)

Ambassador A F M Gousal Azam Sarker in his remarks as Session Chair said the topic being discussed was of paramount importance for Bangladesh's future. The country's progress was increasingly depending on young people. With the expansion of the digital economy, wider information access, and a shift toward innovation-based growth, new possibilities were emerging for the youth to play. A vital role in realising this potential would require focused efforts in areas like skill-building, entrepreneurship, quality education, job creation, and fostering youth-driven innovation. It was equally crucial to ensure that young individuals were empowered to step into leadership positions, shaping the country's economic, social, and political trajectory. As Bangladesh works towards achieving the Sustainable Development Goals, leveraging its youth population effectively would also demand coordinated strategies across diverse sectors.

Ambassador Sarker said this gathering underscored a shared recognition: Bangladesh's future would be determined by how effectively it would engage, prepare, and how the youths design and pursue an enlightened vision. The country was now standing at the gates of a new century—a century defined by science, innovation, and the limitless reach of the Fourth Industrial Revolution. In this era, it no longer matters whether one is in Dhaka or Silicon Valley, people's ideas can travel the world in seconds. Their creativity could also transcend boundaries, both real and imagined. With one of the youngest populations in the region, Bangladesh possessed an unprecedented opportunity to transform the demographic strength into a true engine of national progress. To turn numbers into impact, it must be ensured that the young generation is equipped with the right skills and expertise, provided with inclusive opportunities, alongside a crucial economic and political direction. Better informed, highly connected, and globally aware, today's youth have brought a new set of ideas regarding issues such as digital diplomacy, international collaboration, and economic trends. By leveraging technology, they had the capacity to modernise diplomatic practices, improve cross-border communication, and create more dynamic channels of international cooperation and synergies. As future decision-makers and representatives, their involvement can lead to a more progressive and proactive foreign policy, ultimately strengthening Bangladesh's role in an increasingly competitive geopolitical sphere. The nation's accelerated digital transformation offers its youth significant opportunities to drive innovation and economic advancement. With a majority of the population under 30, Bangladesh had a tech-oriented generation, adaptable, entrepreneurial, and capable of narrowing the digital divide. Their potential contributions spanned across emerging fields, like e-commerce, financial technology, ensuring access

to quality training, modern infrastructure, and supportive policies will enable them to fully harness the benefits of digital connectivity, along with social inclusion and enhanced global competitiveness. The youth were not just the future; they were the force of national renewal. If guided by the right values and equipped with the right tools, they had the potential to shape a better future for the country. They carried the creative spark within themselves to reinvent industries, reshape governance, and reimagine Bangladesh's place in the global order. In a global atmosphere characterised by technological transformations, environmental challenges, competitive drivers of economic growth and champions of sustainability, their participation in digital entrepreneurship, green technologies, and emerging industries would be critical to shape a resilient, inclusive, and future-oriented economy. But with this transformation, there would also come responsibilities. Bangladesh would need a generation that would value merit over privilege, view innovation not as a luxury but a necessity, and a lifestyle to enhance sustainability, not waste or deplete resources. There was a need for problem solvers, not passengers. The youth should dream boldly and act prudently.

Bangladesh is now the eighth-largest country in the world by population, and one of the youngest. That was not just a statistic, but a signal. It meant that if the country's youth could realise their potential, build meaningful connections across borders and create value through knowledge, the nation would not only keep pace but would lead as well. Ambassador Sarker urged the youth to be curious, courageous, and committed to a future that would reflect their dreams and Bangladesh's shared national values. He encouraged them to define the century by the excellence of their minds, integrity of their actions, and depth of their contributions. He further encouraged all participants to engage actively, challenge assumptions, and offer concrete, forward-looking recommendations. The value of this seminar would be measured not by the number of discussions, but the quality of ideas generated and resolved that would be carried forward. Efforts should be kept up to ensure Bangladesh's youth dividend would become not just a possibility, but a reality too. He concluded by saying these conversations were not academic exercises alone, but part of a broader commitment also to translate ideas into strategies and strategies into action. Discussion from here should inform the policies shaped, institutions strengthened, and opportunities created for the younger generation. The stakes were high, not only for Bangladesh's present, but also for its future place in an increasingly interconnected, competitive world.

Session 1: Youth in Building Bangladesh's International Image, Soft Power and Branding

Branding Bangladesh: The Role of Youth in Shaping Soft Power



Dr Razia Sultana

Senior Research Fellow, BIISS

Dr Razia Sultana, Senior Research Fellow BIISS began by noting the significance of living in a globalised and interconnected world, often described as a “global village”. In such a world, she emphasised, a nation’s image is not solely dependent on economic capacity or military strength. Rather, it is shaped by its ability to influence others through cultural values, narratives, and its ability to connect meaningfully with global communities. This capacity for attraction and influence, she explained, lies at the heart of what is known as soft power. For Bangladesh, a rising nation with a rich cultural history and a dynamic population, soft power presents a vital opportunity to project a positive and strategic image internationally.

To establish conceptual clarity, Dr Sultana briefly revisited the origins of the term. She reminded the audience that Joseph Nye first articulated the concept of soft power in the 1990s, defining it as the ability of a country to achieve its goals through attraction and co-option rather than coercion. She contrasted this with hard power, which is based on military might and economic leverage. Soft power, she stressed, depends on nurturing culture, values, and reputation. In her words, the essence of soft power is the ability to tell a story that resonates with others, building influence through credibility and attraction rather than force.

She then presented six major tools of soft power that are particularly relevant in contemporary times: enterprise and economy; government and leadership; culture; education; science and technology; global engagement; and, importantly, digital performance and connectivity. Each of these domains, she argued, can be harnessed strategically to project Bangladesh’s image globally.

Turning to regional illustrations, Dr Sultana highlighted the success of several Asian countries in cultivating soft power. She drew attention to South Korea’s pop culture, particularly its dramas and music, which have captivated young audiences worldwide. Similarly, Japan has built a strong

reputation through cultural diplomacy, while countries such as Thailand and Nepal have effectively leveraged tourism to promote their national interests. These examples, she suggested, demonstrate the potential of soft power to elevate a nation's image in the international arena.

Against this backdrop, she reflected on Bangladesh's own soft power assets which include its rich cultural heritage, vibrant traditions, and historical resilience. She pointed to the country's contributions to UN peacekeeping missions, which have earned Bangladesh recognition and respect globally. She also mentioned the growing role of women in the garment industry and other sectors as evidence of empowerment and progress. Taken together, these factors constitute important elements of Bangladesh's soft power profile.

A significant portion of her remarks focused on the role of youth in advancing Bangladesh's soft power. She acknowledged that, as an emerging country, Bangladesh faces limitations in terms of hard power. Yet, she argued, this makes it all the more necessary to focus on soft power, where the country has untapped potential. Youth, she mentioned, are central to this effort. With more than one-third of Bangladesh's citizens under the age of 35, and with the working-age population exceeding the dependent population, the country stands at a demographic crossroads. This demographic dividend can either be wasted or harnessed for national advantage.

Dr Sultana identified three compelling reasons why Bangladesh must prioritise youth in national branding. First, youth represent a strategic asset in an era of shifting geopolitics, economic disruptions, and technological revolutions. Second, Bangladesh's forthcoming graduation from Least Developed Country (LDC) status by 2026 will result in the loss of preferential trade access, necessitating new strategies for competitiveness. In this context, preparing the younger generation with skills in ICT and digital connectivity is critical. Third, the government's development vision, which aspires to achieve "three zeroes": zero poverty, zero unemployment, and zero emissions by 2030 and 2041, cannot be realised without the constructive engagement of youth.

She elaborated on the various roles that youth could play in strengthening Bangladesh's soft power. They can serve as digital diplomats, projecting a positive image of the country online and in international forums. They can act as entrepreneurs and innovators, contributing to technological progress and economic competitiveness. They can also function as cultural ambassadors, promoting Bangladeshi traditions, art, music, and fashion to the wider world.

However, Dr Sultana cautioned that the path is far from straightforward. Structural, political, social, and technical challenges create barriers for young people. She highlighted deficiencies in the quality of education and the limited availability of training opportunities. A significant gap persists between rural and urban youth in terms of skills and opportunities. Moreover, she highlighted the lack of diversification in innovation, insufficient platforms for showcasing talent, and limited proficiency in the English language. All these factors restrict Bangladesh's ability to project its youth effectively on the global stage.

To address these challenges, she proposed a two-fold strategy. From a top-down perspective, she emphasised the importance of structural and policy reforms. These include investing heavily in digital infrastructure, improving ministerial coordination, expanding vocational training, enhancing digital literacy, and formulating a comprehensive youth policy that integrates social, political, and economic dimensions. She argued that without such institutional support, youth potential cannot be fully realised.

At the same time, she underscored the importance of a bottom-up approach, placing responsibility directly in the hands of young people. Bangladesh, she noted, is currently struggling with an image crisis, as reflected in the growing difficulties faced by students in securing visas abroad. This highlights the urgency of improving the country's international reputation. Youth themselves must play a role in changing perceptions through their conduct, achievements, and innovation.

She offered three specific suggestions for youth. First, they must focus on academic and professional excellence to remain competitive in an increasingly globalised and knowledge-driven world. Second, they should cultivate digital literacy and maintain a positive online presence, recognising that digital platforms are now among the most powerful tools of soft power. Third, they must embrace innovation and entrepreneurship, not only for personal advancement but also to enhance Bangladesh's global standing. In addition, she encouraged young people to actively promote Bangladeshi culture through various forms of creative expression, including art, music, fashion, and other mediums.

In her conclusion, Dr Sultana returned to the foundational concept of soft power, citing Joseph Nye's observation that in the age of information, it is not just whose army wins but whose story wins. She emphasised that youth hold the key to shaping Bangladesh's story. With their creativity, resilience, and determination, they have the capacity to craft a narrative of pride, progress, and influence. She expressed her confidence that by nurturing the country's soft power, Bangladesh's young generation could make the nation more powerful, respected, and beautiful in the years to come.

Harnessing Youth Capital: Reimagining Bangladesh's Soft Power Landscape



Dr Marufa Akter

Head and Associate Professor, GSG, IUB

Dr Marufa Akter began by acknowledging that her colleague, Dr Razia Sultana, had already covered a number of thematic issues related to soft power. Nevertheless, she explained that her own presentation sought to approach the subject from a different angle, focusing on the role of international actors and their initiatives in Bangladesh, and what these imply for the country's young population. While some overlap was inevitable, she emphasised the importance of drawing attention to what is “out there” in terms of foreign engagements and asking how Bangladesh could proactively benefit from them. Her goal was not only to inform the audience about these opportunities, but also to encourage collective reflection on how such engagements can be harnessed for comprehensive national development.

Dr Akter underscored that this discussion is particularly timely, given Bangladesh's current demographic realities. Approximately 40 per cent of the population is under the age of 25, representing what she called a “profound strategic asset”. This demographic dividend holds immense potential for economic growth, social transformation, and national progress. However, she cautioned that the potential is not yet being fully realised. Youth unemployment remains high at 10.5 per cent, and there is a significant gap in essential soft skills, with research showing that only about one-third of Bangladeshi youth are even familiar with the concept. These challenges highlight an urgent need for targeted vocational training, the creation of robust entrepreneurial opportunities, and deliberate investment in the development of soft skills. Without such interventions, she argued, the country risks squandering its greatest resource: its youth.

Situating her argument within broader theoretical frameworks, Dr Akter revisited the concept of soft power as originally articulated by Joseph Nye. Soft power, she explained, is the ability of a country to achieve desired outcomes through attraction rather than coercion or payment, drawing its strength from cultural appeal, political values, and foreign policies. She then introduced the perspective of strategic autonomy, which she used as an analytical lens for her presentation. Through this lens, Bangladesh should not be seen as a passive recipient of foreign influence, but rather as an active agent capable of critically evaluating, selectively engaging with, and even adapting the soft power initiatives extended by major global actors to serve its own national interests.

At the same time, she cautioned that these initiatives are not ideologically neutral. Every soft power strategy comes embedded with normative agendas, whether in the form of democratic values,

development models, or civilisational identities. Recognising these underlying agendas, she argued, is vital for Bangladesh to avoid being swept along by external pressures and instead remain intentional in shaping its engagements.

Dr Akter then detailed the instruments through which soft power is typically exercised. These include educational programmes, scholarships, cultural exchanges, development cooperation, media and entertainment, digital outreach, and language promotion. Each of these instruments, she noted, is already visible in Bangladesh through the presence and activities of various global actors.

She provided a survey of some of the most influential players and their approaches. The United States and the European Union, for example, have long been active in promoting educational and skills development programmes in Bangladesh. These initiatives not only expand opportunities for Bangladeshi students but also shape their exposure to Western values and norms. China, meanwhile, has made significant use of cultural and educational diplomacy through Confucius Institutes, which promote the Chinese language and culture while offering scholarships and creating employment opportunities for speakers of the Chinese language. This is closely tied to broader strategic initiatives such as the Belt and Road Initiative, which also impacts Bangladesh's economy and employment landscape. Russia has similarly expanded its cultural presence through the establishment of the Russia House in Dhaka, which serves as a hub for promoting Russian culture and education. Russian scholarships, youth festivals, and cultural events provide additional avenues for Bangladeshi youth to engage with Russian society and values. Turkey has also emerged as an influential player, using cultural and religious ties to build stronger connections with Bangladeshi youth. South Korea, meanwhile, has had an especially visible impact through the so-called "Korean Wave". K-pop music, television dramas, and other cultural products have gained widespread popularity among young Bangladeshis, effectively turning Korean cultural exports into powerful tools of soft power. Dr Akter pointed to these examples as evidence of how external actors are already shaping youth culture in Bangladesh, whether directly through education and exchange or indirectly through popular culture.

Having outlined these diverse engagements, she turned to their implications. On the positive side, she noted that such programmes and initiatives can play an important role in enhancing Bangladesh's human capital. They improve technical and soft skills, increase access to higher education, and foster entrepreneurship. Participation in international programmes also broadens civic engagement, develops leadership capacity, strengthens media literacy and critical thinking, and allows young people to build global networks. These outcomes, she emphasised, are all crucial for Bangladesh's long-term development and for equipping young people to thrive in an interconnected world.

Yet she also highlighted several challenges. Sustainability is a major concern, as demonstrated by the recent discontinuation of certain USAID programmes in Bangladesh. When programmes are withdrawn, the opportunities they provided are lost, leaving gaps in youth development efforts. Awareness and accessibility also remain limited, particularly for rural and marginalised youth who often lack information or resources to take advantage of these initiatives. Moreover, there are risks associated with normative conflicts, as different global powers promote distinct sets of values. In this context, Bangladesh faces the danger of becoming a battleground for competing ideologies, unless it carefully navigates these dynamics with a clear understanding of its own priorities.

Dr Akter stressed that these challenges cannot be ignored. Instead, Bangladesh must take proactive steps to ensure that foreign initiatives serve the country's development objectives rather than dictating them. She proposed the development of a comprehensive National Youth Soft Power Strategy

as a way forward. Such a strategy would integrate foreign soft power initiatives into Bangladesh's long-term youth development agenda, ensuring coherence and sustainability. It would identify priority sectors, particularly green technologies, digital skills, and entrepreneurship, which are critical in the current global context. It would also prioritise inclusivity, ensuring that youth from rural and marginalised communities, including women, persons with disabilities, and the ultra-poor, have equitable access to opportunities.

Dr Akter further underscored the importance of investing in national institutional capacity. Bangladesh, she argued, still lags behind in the area of vocational and technical education, and more must be done to strengthen these institutions so they can deliver relevant skills training. She emphasised that external initiatives should not simply be received passively but rather co-created and co-owned by Bangladeshis. This approach would foster sustainability and ensure alignment with national priorities.

Digital platforms, she noted, provide an especially powerful opportunity. Online learning, skills development, and virtual exchanges can significantly expand access to opportunities, particularly for students in remote or underserved areas. COVID-19 has underscored the importance of digital infrastructure and online platforms, yet gaps remain in Bangladesh's preparedness. More investment is needed in both digital infrastructure and the skills to use it effectively. She also called for greater emphasis on preparing youth for the Fourth Industrial Revolution, which will demand a new set of competencies ranging from advanced technological literacy to adaptability in rapidly changing economic contexts.

Beyond technical skills, Dr Akter stressed the importance of fostering critical engagement. As a teacher, she highlighted on the need to invest in critical thinking and media literacy among youth. With the rapid spread of digital information, young people are vulnerable to misinformation and manipulation. Developing their ability to critically evaluate information, distinguish between reliable and unreliable sources, and engage with pluralistic ideas is essential. She argued that without these capacities, Bangladesh's youth will not be able to fully harness their potential or serve as effective agents of national development. She also drew attention to the importance of resilience. Technological innovation brings both opportunities and risks, including exposure to misinformation and exploitation by opportunistic actors. Strengthening resilience among youth, she argued, is therefore as important as equipping them with technical competencies.

In her concluding remarks, Dr Akter summarised the key points of her presentation. Bangladesh, she said, possesses an unparalleled demographic asset in its youth. The engagement of international actors presents both significant opportunities and notable challenges. To capitalise on the former and mitigate the latter, Bangladesh must adopt a strategic approach, underpinned by a comprehensive youth soft power strategy. With deliberate planning and effective implementation, the country can transform external influences into catalysts for its own development, cultivating a generation that is empowered, resilient, and globally engaged. She envisioned a future in which Bangladesh would not simply be a passive recipient of foreign soft power but an active architect of its own destiny. By aligning international opportunities with national priorities, investing in institutional and human capacity, and fostering critical and inclusive engagement, Bangladesh could ensure that its young people are equipped not only to succeed individually but to collectively contribute to the nation's progress. With such a vision, she concluded, Bangladesh has the potential to transform its demographic advantage into a powerful engine for national development and global relevance.

Branding through Frugal Innovation: Sharing Some Practical Experiences



Dr Munal Mahbub

Chairman, Mati-ta

Dr Munal Mahbub began with her detailed elaboration on Mati-ta. She emphasised that Mati-ta was never conceived as a luxury resort or an amusement park. Instead, it was the manifestation of a dream rooted in frugal innovation, youthful passion, and a profound love for the land that Bangladeshis call home. In just a few short years, this initiative had grown into one of Bangladesh's most widely recognised and celebrated icons, offering a testament to what young people, limited resources, and bold vision can collectively achieve. For Dr Mahbub, the journey of Mati-ta was not about external investment or corporate backing but about building something extraordinary and world-class from the modest resources already available within the country.

She explained that the project began with no grand financial investment, no international blueprint, and no corporate sponsorship. Instead, it began with a single question: could the next generation of Bangladeshis have a space where they might embrace nature, reconnect with culture, and experience their roots, all without the necessity of millions in funding? Mati-ta was born on an untamed hillside marked only by a footpath. There was no electricity, no formal structures, and no modern infrastructure, only silence, wilderness, and an idea. Out of these simple beginnings, a vibrant and innovative space gradually emerged through trial and error, unrelenting passion, and strong community involvement. At present, Mati-ta has grown into the largest activity-based eco-resort in Bangladesh, capable of hosting more than 400 campers overnight. It featured adventure towers, ziplines, rope courses, treehouses, climbing walls, and numerous other attractions, all built with an ethos of sustainability and connection to the land. Rather than importing luxury materials or constructing in ways that were disconnected from local traditions, the resort relied heavily on indigenous resources such as bamboo, jute, and recycled wood. This conscious choice reduced the environmental footprint, generated employment for local communities, and resonated deeply with visitors' emotions.

Dr Mahbub elaborated on some of the creative innovations that set Mati-ta apart. A treehouse built on stilts used entirely recycled wood; a natural swimming pool relied on rainwater harvesting to reduce chemical usage; and even old military jeeps were repurposed into adventure rides. Eco-villas and locally crafted furniture, all fashioned from recycled and indigenous materials, underscored the resort's philosophy of sustainability. For her, these efforts represented more than just a business model.

They instead symbolised a larger commitment to resourcefulness, environmental responsibility, and community empowerment.

She then turned to the subject of branding, reflecting on how Mati-ta became a viral phenomenon. Unlike traditional marketing strategies that rely heavily on paid advertisements and hired influencers, Mati-ta pursued an approach built on authenticity and storytelling. The team relied on mobile phones to capture raw, emotional moments: a guest jumping into a natural pool, families sipping tea in the rain, or young people ziplining across lush green valleys. Visitors, many of whom are creative and digitally savvy youth, organically became ambassadors for the resort by posting their own photos, reels, and reviews. This user-generated content fostered a community-driven narrative rather than a corporate one, fuelling growth through word of mouth and emotional connection rather than high-cost campaigns.

Dr Mahbub noted that Mati-ta did not merely sell rooms or facilities; it offered experiences. From bushcraft activities for students to rope courses for scouts and treehouse stays for families, the project encouraged deep emotional bonds that led to repeat visits and sustained popularity. In her view, this model demonstrated that Bangladeshi youth could lead innovation not by imitating Silicon Valley but by drawing inspiration from their own soil, culture, and limitations. Frugal innovation, she stressed, is not about doing less; it is about doing better with less. It is about transforming mud, bamboo, and recycled materials into spaces of creativity, and about turning constraints into opportunities for imagination and innovation.

She also emphasised the broader implications for Bangladesh's future. If given the tools, trust, and freedom, young people could revolutionise sectors far beyond tourism, including agriculture, education, and even diplomacy. What Mati-ta represents, she said, is more than an eco-resort: it is a symbol of a resilient, creative, and peaceful Bangladesh. She asked the audience to imagine a scenario



where every district in the country had its own Mati-ta, which is a youth-driven eco-hub that would create jobs, attract international attention, and redefine the nation's soft power. Rather than relying solely on remittances or garment exports, Bangladesh could become globally recognised for ecotourism, rural innovation, and grassroots creativity.

In her reflections, Dr Mahbub underscored that true branding is not merely a business strategy but a nation-building exercise. It is not about logos or advertisements, but about actions, values, and authenticity. Through its reliance on bamboo, mud, recycled wood, and indigenous methods, Mati-ta demonstrates that Bangladesh already possesses the resources to create sustainable, world-class projects. The food is prepared in traditional ways reminiscent of grandmothers' kitchens, while the architecture reflects the rhythms of local life. Every detail, she noted, reinforces the philosophy that honesty and authenticity resonate more deeply than imported luxury.

Closing her remarks, Dr Mahbub issued a direct call to the youth of Bangladesh. They need not wait for foreign degrees, massive investment funds, or the perfect opportunity. What they need are problems worth solving, a sense of purpose, and the courage to build regardless of the constraints. The most powerful form of branding, she reminded them, is not what one says but what one does. When young people build with heart, share authentically, and lead with passion, they do more than go viral, they would reshape the narrative of an entire nation. She urged everyone in the room to stop waiting for perfect conditions and to begin building, sharing, and leading from this very moment. For her, Mati-ta was not just a personal dream, it was a living example of how Bangladesh's youth could craft a future that is sustainable, innovative, and globally admired.

Youth as the Country's Most Honest Global Image



Sinthia Kamal

Student, GSG , IUB

Sinthia Kamal began by emphasising that in a world dominated by carefully staged diplomacy and curated headlines, it is often students, activists, and young creatives who reflect what Bangladesh truly is. Their struggles, courage, laughter, rage, and compassion reflect a mirror to the nation and the world. That reflection may not always be convenient, she said, but it is always real. She contrasted this with the practice of soft power. Governments invest heavily in shaping their international images through cultural policy, tourism campaigns, or diplomatic messaging. Yet, she argued, the world does not always see the polished image that leaders attempt to project. Instead, what resonates globally is what young people do: when they protest, innovate, speak out, or demonstrate resilience and creativity. That, she insisted, is what becomes the image of Bangladesh. Youth are the mirror, reflecting the country without filters. To ground her argument in lived reality, Ms Kamal pointed to the events of July 2024. What unfolded in the streets, on university campuses, and across online platforms was neither orchestrated nor packaged. Instead, it was raw and honest. Students walked miles, confronted fear with conviction, and carried the flag not as a symbol for show but as an emblem of dignity and accountability when few others did. In those moments, Bangladesh did not need a marketing campaign; the youth themselves became the message. They projected to the world a country that dares to hope and a generation that still believes in justice and dignity. For her, this was proof that young people embody the most authentic form of soft power available to Bangladesh.

Yet, she cautioned, honesty alone is not enough. A mirror may reflect truth, but the deeper question is whether anyone listens to that reflection. Young people are willing to represent Bangladesh on global platforms, but are they given the room, the resources, and the support to do so? She posed critical questions: Are youth included when foreign policy is shaped? Are they present when narratives about Bangladesh are crafted, when panels are formed, missions dispatched, or projects funded? If, as she argued, the youth are indeed the most honest image of the country, then investment in them must go beyond symbolism. It must reflect a real belief that they can carry Bangladesh higher. She returned, near the end, to the mirror in her grandmother's house. It remains, she said, old and flawed but trusted because it tells the truth. In the same way, Bangladesh's youth may not be flawless, but they are fearless. They may not know everything, but they know how to care for others. And in a world where diplomacy is often staged and storytelling filtered, truth itself is the rarest and most valuable form of soft power. She concluded with an appeal: "We are ready to represent this country not with slogans but with substance. All we ask is this: do not replace the mirror. Just start looking into it".

Open Discussion



One participant raised a concern about how to influence or change the perceptions of elderly people in communities who remain pessimistic about Bangladesh's future. The participant observed that when young people consult elders, they are often advised to leave the country, whereas younger generations and members of the diaspora see potential in Bangladesh. The participant asked how to bridge this generational gap and unite around a shared vision of building a strong nation.

Dr Shaikh Jobayed Hossain, Joint Secretary (Youth Wing), Ministry of Youth and Sports noted that, as someone directly involved with youth issues, they wished to share several points. The participant thanked the presenters but felt the seminar lacked focus, particularly in terms of connecting with policymakers. They highlighted that entrepreneurship was not given sufficient emphasis, despite the government having recently introduced the National Youth Entrepreneurship Policy 2025, which they considered a major achievement. The participant also appreciated the presentation by Ms Kamal, particularly her reflection on how the “mirror” reflects what society chooses to project.



A student of the Department of International Relations, Jahangirnagar University asked how students could become more integrated in rebuilding national systems. They noted that there was a growing discussion on the involvement of students in reform processes and sought guidance on how students could contribute meaningfully.



A student from Jahangirnagar University, raised the issue of the absence of a mainstream English language platform that highlights the achievements of Bangladeshi youth. They argued that collaboration with international media outlets such as the BBC or Al Jazeera could enhance Bangladesh's soft power globally and asked whether a dedicated platform of this nature was necessary.





A faculty member from Department of Sociology, East West University, referred to the synchronised protests of the previous year, which attracted global attention. They questioned whether Bangladesh was adequately equipped to construct and promote its own narrative internationally, rather than being subject to narratives created abroad.

Rear Admiral (Retd) A S M A Awal observed that soft power was Bangladesh's primary asset, given the country's limited capability in other areas. He reiterated the importance of culture as a foundation of soft power, referencing elements such as Lalon, Tagore, Nazrul, Mymensingh Gitika, Hasan Raja, and Shah Abdul Karim as cultural assets. He cautioned that there were debates within intellectual circles about whether Bangladesh's culture was authentic or imposed and noted that defining a new cultural identity was an ongoing challenge. He argued that youth must play a central role in projecting Bangladesh's rich cultural mosaic as part of its soft power.



Responses from the Panellists



Sinthia Kamal

Student, GSG, IUB

In response, Sinthia Kamal stated that integration into the system required efforts from both sides. Young people needed to prepare themselves through quality education, while the system needed to create functional opportunities. She emphasised that the process was mutual, and neither side could be solely blamed nor credited.



Dr Marufa Akter

Head and Associate Professor, GSG, IUB

Dr Marufa Akter addressed questions related to platforms and curriculum. She agreed that greater efforts were needed to showcase the achievements of Bangladeshi youth through the media and suggested the development of a strategic approach in this regard. On the curriculum issue, she explained that many universities, including IUB, had begun revising their curricula following consultations with students, alumni, and industry representatives. She mentioned that the focus had shifted towards developing research and soft skills, including statistics and both qualitative and quantitative methodologies. She emphasised that universities were increasingly recognising global and national demands and adapting accordingly.



Dr Razia Sultana

Senior Research Fellow, BIISS

Dr Razia Sultana responded to several questions from the audience. She advised against pessimism, noting that Bangladesh possessed significant cultural resources and soft power potential, despite being in a transitional period. She referred to the example of the young entrepreneur, Dr Munal Mahbub, who had established a successful career from humble beginnings. She also highlighted the disparities within the education system, particularly between English, medium and madrasa-based backgrounds, and stressed the need for reforms. Addressing the concern raised by the Youth Ministry representative, she clarified that efforts had been made to involve policymakers, including an invitation to the Secretary of the Ministry of Youth, though scheduling constrained him from participating in the seminar.

Closing Remarks by the Moderator



Professor Dr Imtiaz Ahmed

Executive Director
Centre for Alternatives

Professor Dr Imtiaz Ahmed began by urging the audience to be cautious whenever they encounter a concept that is repeated multiple times. Repetition, he argued, should prompt us to ask what the concept truly means. “Never take any concept for granted”, he said. “Every concept has a history, a birth, a growth, and ultimately, a death. Concepts are created by human beings, and they must also die at some point”.

The first concept he challenged was the very idea of youth. Too often, he said, it is taken for granted that youth is simply a matter of age. But who decided that? In which century did we begin to equate youth with a number of years lived? Drawing on Shakespeare’s *Crabbed Age and Youth*, Dr Ahmed noted that the bard contrasted youth not with physical old age but with oldness in thinking. Shakespeare, he reminded the audience, aligned himself with youth because he aligned himself with change. Thus, for Dr Ahmed, youth is not defined by age but by belief in change. Those who do not believe in change, regardless of their years, are not truly young. By the same logic, there are older people who remain youthful precisely because they continue to embrace change.

He illustrated this with examples from history. Gautam Buddha attained enlightenment at 35 and transformed the world. The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) was 40 when he received his first revelation, which changed history forever. Rabindranath Tagore, remarkably, began painting at 63 and produced a body of work rivalling that of greats like Picasso or Dalí. Gandhi entered politics at 45, and in the next three decades, he wrote over 80 volumes despite having published almost nothing in his first 45 years.

The lesson, he stressed, is clear: “Do not take the concept of youth uncritically. To me, youth means one who believes in change and is willing to act on it”. He then addressed the idea of the “youth dividend”. Literature, he said, tells us that harnessing the potential of young people requires three fundamental conditions: education, health, and employment. Without these, demographic advantage becomes meaningless. “In Bangladesh, unfortunately, we are in bad shape in all three areas”, he cautioned. Numbers alone do not produce dividends; investment in these essentials does.

Looking specifically at Bangladesh after July 2024, he added that the country now needs three urgent things: knowledge, stability, and professionalism. Without them, he warned, talk

of transformation will remain hollow. Linking this to IUB, he pointed to the university's own logo, which references the Qur'anic command in Surah Iqra: "Read". This, he said, was the very first divine revelation, and it called not for repetition but for exploration, for reading beyond what had already been written. Dr Ahmed then cautioned against the myth that youth are engaging in national transformation for the "first time" today. From the 1948 language controversy, through the 1952 Language Movement, to 1969 and 1971, it was always young people who stood at the forefront. He predicted that all future movements in Bangladesh would also be driven by youth, not because of their age, but because of their willingness to act for change.

To illustrate, he shared a personal story. In 1971, as a class nine student, he left his parents without telling them and went to Agartala to join the liberation struggle. He carried only one book: Marx and Engels' German Ideology, which he considers to be a text far beyond the grasp of most teenagers today. At that time, he said, it was not exceptional for a young student to take such steps; circumstances had created that youthfulness. The message: youth is created by circumstances, not merely by biology.

He concluded by stressing that being young does not automatically give anyone the ability to change the world. The real question is whether one wants to change the world. Age does not determine this. He cited colleagues such as Professor Sakhawat Ali Khan, who, though retired, remain youthful in their thinking and passion for change. In his closing words, Dr Ahmed encouraged the audience to embrace the times they live in, even with all its absurdities.

Session 2: Youth's Contribution to Economy, Climate-Led Innovation, and Development

Reaching High through Development Visions: The Role of Youth in Entrepreneurship, Startups and Technology-driven Enterprises



Md Rafid Abrar Miah

Research Officer, BIISS

Md Rafid Abrar Miah began his presentation by emphasising that the theme of his presentation—the role of youth in entrepreneurship, start-ups, and technology-driven enterprises—was pivotal to shaping the future trajectory and national destiny of Bangladesh. Titled “*Reaching High through Development Visions: The Role of Youth in Entrepreneurship, Start-ups and Technology-driven Enterprises*”, the presentation sought to explore how the country’s youthful population could be empowered to drive innovation, economic growth, and sustainable development.

Drawing upon demographic evidence, Mr Miah highlighted statistics from the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS, 2022) which reveal that 47 per cent of the Bangladeshi population is under the age of 25, while 62 per cent is below the age of 35. He described this phenomenon not as a mere demographic reality but as a historic “window of opportunity”. According to him, this youthful majority, if nurtured through vision, skills and institutional support, has the capacity to drive innovation, enhance productivity, and foster inclusive growth. Conversely, without strategic planning and visionary leadership, the same youth bulge could potentially evolve into a demographic burden. He posed a central and thought-provoking question to the audience: how can Bangladesh convert this “youth bulge” into a “youth dividend”? He argued that the solution lies in harnessing entrepreneurship, technological innovation, and youth-led development initiatives.

The presenter reminded participants that Bangladesh’s national vision aims to transform the country into a knowledge-based, high-income nation. However, he warned that a vision without actionable strategies remains only a dream. To make this vision a tangible reality, young people must not merely be positioned as beneficiaries of development programmes, but rather as architects of development themselves. He particularly emphasised youth-driven start-ups, digital enterprises, and green innovations as indispensable components of the journey towards sustainable growth.

To illustrate the transformative potential of youth-led initiatives, Mr Miah shared several success stories from Bangladesh's entrepreneurial landscape. Pathao, founded by a young entrepreneur in their twenties, has grown into one of the country's most prominent digital start-ups, serving over five million users and generating employment for thousands of riders and delivery personnel. Similarly, ShopUp, a B2B e-commerce platform, raised over US\$ 110 million in international funding—the largest amount ever secured by a Bangladeshi start-up. Its co-founder and CEO, Afif Zaman, began his entrepreneurial journey as a young innovator. Another widely recognised case is 10 Minute School, whose digital education platform reached 2.5 million students per month during the COVID-19 pandemic. These examples, he stressed, should not be dismissed as isolated or exceptional. Rather, they indicate an emerging trend and a structural shift in Bangladesh's innovation ecosystem, proving that the country can produce globally competitive enterprises even from relatively remote regions.

Mr Miah further informed the audience that Bangladesh currently hosts over 1,200 active start-ups, employing more than 1.5 million people both directly and indirectly. Collectively, these start-ups are valued at over US\$ 2 billion, and in the past five years alone, more than US\$ 500 million in venture capital has flowed into the country. He observed that Bangladesh, with its 125 million internet users, has witnessed a democratisation of digital entrepreneurship. Technology is no longer confined to urban centres; rural communities are increasingly becoming part of the innovation ecosystem, making the growth process more inclusive.

Turning to the pressing issue of climate change, the presenter reminded the audience that Bangladesh remains one of the most climate-vulnerable nations in the world. Yet, he argued, young entrepreneurs are leading the way in offering creative, locally rooted solutions. For example, Garbage Man, a youth-led enterprise based in Khulna, is transforming municipal waste into organic fertiliser, thereby addressing both environmental degradation and livelihood needs. Similarly, SOLshare, a start-up founded by young engineers, has pioneered peer-to-peer solar energy trading through micro-grid systems. These, Mr Miah observed, are not just climate innovations but entrepreneurial interventions that simultaneously contribute to sustainability, economic resilience, and community empowerment.

The scope of youth-led technological innovation, he elaborated, extends beyond climate and environmental issues. Platforms such as Shajgoj, Bongo, BDPharma, and others are addressing social challenges ranging from urban unemployment and financial inclusion in rural areas to women's empowerment and access to healthcare. These cases collectively demonstrate that technology-driven entrepreneurship in Bangladesh is not displacing employment, as often feared, but is instead generating new forms of dignified, meaningful work, particularly for young people.

However, the presenter candidly acknowledged the challenges that continue to constrain the potential of Bangladeshi youth entrepreneurs. Youth unemployment stands at 10.6 per cent, nearly double the national average. Access to finance remains a critical barrier, with three out of every four young entrepreneurs reporting difficulties in securing early-stage capital. Additionally, the lack of structured incubation centres, mentorship opportunities, and support systems—particularly outside Dhaka—restricts the ability of young innovators from other regions to realise their full potential.

In order to overcome these challenges and unlock the dynamism of youth-driven enterprises, Mr Miah put forward a set of actionable policy recommendations. These included the establishment of a National Youth Innovation Fund to provide early-stage financing, the creation of techno-

hubs in each administrative division to decentralise opportunities, the provision of green start-up grants to promote climate-smart entrepreneurship, and the incorporation of entrepreneurship into technical and vocational education curricula. He further underscored the importance of engaging the Bangladeshi diaspora, whose financial resources, global networks, and expertise could significantly strengthen the domestic innovation ecosystem.

In conclusion, Mr Miah offered a powerful message on the need to reconceptualise how society views its young population. Instead of asking young people “what do you want to be when you grow up?”, he urged that we should ask them “what problems do you want to solve?”. He emphasised that by inspiring, investing in, and incubating the country’s youth, Bangladesh can cultivate a generation of risk-takers, change-makers, and solution-builders. His presentation ended on an optimistic note, reiterating his firm belief that with the right ecosystem, the youth of Bangladesh will flourish and lead the nation towards a prosperous, sustainable, and knowledge-driven future.

Bangladeshi Youth in Climate Action: Navigating Local Influence and the Complexities of International Policy Dialogue



Dr K Ayaz Rabbani

Dean and Associate Professor
School of Environment & Life Sciences, IUB

Dr K Ayaz Rabbani commenced his presentation by outlining his focus on the evolving role of Bangladeshi youth in climate action, particularly in influencing policy at both national and international levels. He emphasised that while Bangladesh remains one of the most climate-vulnerable countries globally, the nation has also emerged as a leader in innovative climate solutions, and young people are central to this process. The presentation was titled *“Bangladeshi Youth in Climate Action: Navigating Local Influence and the Complexities of International Policy Dialogue”*, reflecting the dual focus on grassroots engagement and high-level policy advocacy.

Dr Rabbani began by contextualising Bangladesh’s vulnerability to climate change. He noted that the country is regularly affected by climate-induced disasters, including floods, cyclones, and droughts, resulting in annual losses of approximately US\$ 3 billion. He stressed that the implications of climate change are immediate, with projections suggesting that millions more will be affected by 2050. While numerous geographic, social, and economic factors contribute to Bangladesh’s high vulnerability, Dr Rabbani emphasised that the nation’s challenges are matched by its achievements in climate adaptation, mitigation, and advocacy. Bangladesh has been recognised internationally for its leadership in locally led adaptation, innovative mechanisms for addressing loss and damage, and active participation in forums such as the Climate Vulnerable Forum.

The presentation then shifted to the international role of youth in climate action. Dr Rabbani highlighted the active participation of young people worldwide in climate policy discussions, citing Severn Suzuki’s 1992 speech—often referred to as a precursor to contemporary youth climate activism—as an early example of global youth engagement. He emphasised that youth, including those from Bangladesh, occupy a significant space in international climate discourse, attending major forums and conferences such as the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) Conference of Parties (COP). These engagements provide young people a platform to influence binding decisions that affect multiple countries.

Dr Rabbani provided an overview of the ways in which Bangladeshi youth are organising themselves to influence climate policy. University students and young professionals have been forming networks and organisations dedicated to climate advocacy, actively participating in international conferences, and attempting to engage with national policymakers. These young leaders address critical issues, including climate adaptation for vulnerable communities, gender-responsive climate action, financing for loss and

damage, the transition away from fossil fuels, and the inclusion of youth in national climate policy processes. He highlighted that these concerns are not merely youth issues but encompass broader societal priorities, reflecting the intergenerational significance of climate action.

Despite their growing influence internationally, Dr Rabbani noted that young people in Bangladesh face significant challenges when attempting to shape national policy. Coordination among government agencies, non-governmental organisations, and research institutions remains limited, and inclusion in official delegations is often restricted. Young activists must navigate complex power dynamics, striking a balance between the energy and passion of grassroots activism and the diplomacy and negotiation skills required for effective policy engagement. Additionally, he observed that young participants are sometimes tokenised as figureheads without meaningful involvement, and securing funding, institutional support, and access to policy networks continues to be a challenge at the national level.

Nevertheless, Dr Rabbani highlighted encouraging trends. Over recent years, Bangladeshi youth have moved from being mere observers at international climate conferences to active participants with increasing influence on policy discussions. He acknowledged the foundational role of the late Professor Saleemul Huq in mentoring and facilitating young people's participation in such forums. He also noted that, in contrast to domestic arenas, Bangladeshi youth are achieving greater recognition and impact internationally, leveraging the support of global organisations and networks.

The presentation included examples of successful youth-led initiatives in Bangladesh that demonstrate both policy engagement and practical action. Dr Rabbani underscored that these young leaders are not only advocating for policy change but also contributing directly to solutions on the ground, bridging the gap between scientific understanding, community needs, and institutional frameworks. He emphasised that youth engagement in climate policy should be framed not as preparation for future leadership but as active leadership in the present. Young people, he asserted, are the leaders of today, capable of catalysing immediate and meaningful change.

Looking forward, Dr Rabbani outlined several strategies to strengthen youth participation in climate action. These included establishing national platforms to coordinate youth initiatives, providing mentorship and support through universities, enhancing policy literacy and negotiation skills, and fostering greater integration of young people into national decision-making processes. He highlighted that universities could play a critical role as bridges between experienced policymakers and motivated youth, ensuring that energy, passion, and local knowledge are effectively channelled into constructive advocacy and action.

In conclusion, Dr Rabbani emphasised the need to recognise the immediate and substantial role of young people in climate action. He argued that with adequate support structures, funding, mentorship, and platforms for engagement, Bangladeshi youth can not only participate in international climate diplomacy but also shape national policies in meaningful ways. By positioning young people as active partners rather than future leaders, Bangladesh can effectively harness their skills, knowledge, and innovation to address the pressing challenges of climate change. Dr Rabbani concluded his presentation by inviting discussion on the broader question of whether youth in Bangladesh can influence the national policy process, encouraging the audience to reflect on their own potential as agents of change. He reinforced that while barriers exist, the combination of youth passion, international recognition, and institutional support offers a pathway for substantive engagement and influence.

Creating Local Jobs and Scaling Global: Bangladesh's Youth Entrepreneurs



Shamim Ahmed Mridha

Executive Director and Founder
Eco Network-Global

Shamim Ahmed Mridha delivered an inspiring and highly informative presentation on the theme of “*Creating Local Jobs and Scaling Global: Bangladesh's Youth Entrepreneurs*” at the seminar. Addressing a distinguished audience, Mr Mridha provided a compelling account of the opportunities, challenges, and strategies for youth-led entrepreneurship in Bangladesh, with a particular emphasis on environmentally and socially conscious innovation.

Mr Mridha began by sharing his personal journey, situating his narrative within the broader context of youth engagement in Bangladesh. He recounted that he had founded Eco-Network Global in 2018 while pursuing his first year of studies in the Department of Environmental Science at the Bangladesh University of Professionals (BUP). At that time, he observed that while there was a significant degree of enthusiasm among young people to address environmental and social challenges, there was a marked lack of structured platforms or opportunities to translate this enthusiasm into sustainable action. The early phase of his engagement involved voluntary participation, awareness-raising campaigns, and involvement in climate and environmental strikes. While such activities successfully mobilised attention and built a sense of solidarity, many young participants, Mr Mridha noted, became frustrated after a year or two, primarily because they lacked guidance on how to convert activism into tangible outcomes.

He emphasised a crucial insight from his experience: activism, while indispensable for raising awareness, is not sufficient on its own to generate long-term societal or economic impact. Young people must cultivate professional skills, acquire entrepreneurial knowledge, and understand how to operationalise ideas to produce sustainable and scalable solutions. In this regard, he stressed the transformative potential of youth entrepreneurship as the bridge between advocacy and actionable social change.

To illustrate the practical applications of youth entrepreneurship, Mr Mridha provided examples of innovative youth-led initiatives that have successfully created employment opportunities while addressing pressing social and environmental issues. For instance, Garbage Man, based in Khulna, converts municipal waste into organic fertiliser, thus addressing urban waste management challenges while generating local livelihoods. Similarly, Solshare, a solar microgrid enterprise, facilitates peer-to-peer energy trading, promoting the adoption of renewable energy and enhancing energy access in

underserved communities. These examples, he argued, demonstrate that Bangladeshi youth are capable of developing solutions that are simultaneously environmentally sustainable, socially beneficial, and economically viable. Such initiatives not only have the potential to transform local communities but also to scale internationally, positioning Bangladesh as a hub for innovative, youth-led solutions.

Despite these achievements, Mr Mridha candidly addressed the significant obstacles confronting young entrepreneurs in Bangladesh. He highlighted the limited availability of early-stage funding and venture capital, particularly for ventures located outside major urban centres such as Dhaka. Structured mentorship and incubation facilities remain inadequate, and many promising young innovators struggle to navigate the transition from activism to professional entrepreneurship. Regional disparities exacerbate these challenges, constraining access to resources, guidance, and networks.

Mr Mridha also discussed the evolving support landscape. He observed that both the government and private sector are increasingly providing funding, incubation, and mentorship opportunities for youth-led startups, particularly in green technology, digital enterprises, and other innovative sectors. He emphasised the importance for young people to leverage these resources, cultivate an entrepreneurial mindset, and develop practical skills that enable the translation of ideas into scalable, sustainable ventures.

International exposure, Mr Mridha argued, is another critical enabler of success for Bangladeshi youth. Drawing from his own experience as an official youth delegate at COP 28, he described how participation in international forums allows young entrepreneurs to gain knowledge, build networks, and explore avenues for global scaling. Engagement in these forums provides insight into international best practices, negotiation strategies, and policy frameworks, equipping youth with the expertise to contribute meaningfully both at home and abroad. Such exposure, he noted, also enhances the credibility of young innovators and opens doors to collaborative partnerships and funding opportunities that may not be accessible through national platforms alone.

Mr Mridha concluded his presentation by issuing a call to action for young people in Bangladesh. He urged them to start by engaging locally, gaining practical experience, and identifying opportunities for meaningful impact. Activism, he emphasised, is a crucial first step; however, it must ultimately be complemented by professional development, entrepreneurial thinking, and structured approaches to problem-solving. He encouraged youth to seek mentorship, collaborate with experienced practitioners, and pursue initiatives that are sustainable, scalable, and socially transformative.

The Power of Youth in Simple Climate Actions



Mohammad Mohaiminul Kabir Chisty

Student, GSG, IUB

Mohammad Mohaiminul Kabir Chisty delivered his presentation entitled “*The Power of Youth in Simple Climate Actions*” with conviction and passion. He asked to imagine a world in which nature could speak back to humanity: what if the trees could question why they were being cut down, the rivers could protest against their pollution, and the air itself could demand purification? Mr Chisty observed that, in truth, nature has always communicated with humankind—not only through its seasons and generosity, but through disasters that signal deep ecological distress.

He explained that the central purpose of his talk was to reflect upon humanity’s relationship with the natural world, to challenge the belief that climate action is solely the responsibility of governments and international organisations, and most importantly, to inspire young people to step up, innovate, and be active participants in the search for sustainable solutions. To provide a historical perspective, he recalled that for centuries, ancestors had lived in balance with the environment, guided by the profound recognition that human beings are not separate from nature, but an inseparable part of it. He pointed to the indigenous communities of the Chittagong Hill Tracts as an example, noting that they had long acted as custodians of Bangladesh’s natural wealth. These communities have traditionally lived in accordance with the principles of respect, sustainability, and profound ecological understanding. Yet, as he reminded his audience, much of this wisdom had been abandoned in modern society, where consumption now far exceeds production, waste surpasses usage, and exploitation of natural resources consistently outpaces efforts of regeneration.

Mr Chisty underscored the gravity of this imbalance by citing research which indicated that current levels of human consumption demand the resources of 1.6 planets. In such circumstances, he asked, how could humanity hope to live sustainably, consume responsibly, and preserve opportunities for future generations to thrive? For him, reclaiming the future must begin with small, conscious choices in everyday life. Innovation, he argued, does not always require cutting-edge technology or billion-dollar enterprises. Rather, it often lies in the creativity and resourcefulness of ordinary people who discover simple, affordable solutions to problems. To illustrate his point, he provided several inspiring examples from around the globe. He recalled the international campaign to ban single-use plastics, which did not begin with governments or corporate giants but with small acts—individuals carrying reusable items, cafés discarding plastic straws, and community-led clean-up initiatives. These modest efforts gradually grew into a worldwide movement. Mr Chisty reminded his audience that just as small actions can snowball into transformative change, ignoring small warnings can accumulate into

serious crises. Nowhere, he argued, is this truer than in the case of climate change, which he described as a national emergency with consequences as grave as questions of national security.

He explained that while issues of security often dominate headlines, it is climate change that silently fuels many of Bangladesh's most pressing challenges—food shortages, inflation, mass displacement, and the erosion of development gains. Drawing attention to recent events, he cited the floods in Feni in August 2024, which displaced numerous families, destroyed homes and businesses, and severely impacted livelihoods. Farmers in particular faced devastating losses as their crops and livestock were swept away. According to reports by the Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD), these floods alone caused economic damages amounting to US\$ 1.3 billion. Such disasters, Mr Chisty argued, were not isolated incidents but part of a broader pattern of intensifying heatwaves, recurrent floods, and extreme weather events that undermine billions of dollars of national development expenditure and deepen existing vulnerabilities.

Despite these formidable challenges, he highlighted innovative examples of how ordinary people across the world are responding with ingenuity and determination. He cited the “Trash for Tuition” initiative in the Philippines, where parents and students collect recyclable materials in exchange for educational fees. Not only does this reduce waste, but it also expands access to education for underprivileged children. He also referred to a Kenyan start-up that converts plastic waste into durable, low-cost paving bricks, thereby addressing both waste management and infrastructure needs. Similarly, he drew attention to Greta Thunberg's “Fridays for Future” movement, which began as a single student protest but rapidly expanded into a global youth mobilisation for climate action. Closer to South Asia, he mentioned campaigns in Karachi and Lahore where young people tagged urban trees with messages such as “I reduce your heat” and “I clean your air”, in an effort to promote environmental awareness during rapid urbanisation.

From these varied examples, Mr Chisty distilled a central lesson: one does not need wealth, fame, or political power to make a meaningful difference. What is required is the willingness to act and the courage to persevere. Planting trees, reducing personal carbon footprints, or participating in community-driven projects are not merely symbolic actions; they send powerful messages that individual responsibility underpins collective change. He acknowledged that systemic transformation is essential yet emphasised that it is ordinary citizens who lay the foundation for sustainable futures through their everyday commitments.

Mr Chisty concluded his presentation by stressing that small actions, when multiplied by millions, become unstoppable movements. Every effort, whether teaching a child about recycling, supporting local eco-friendly businesses, or raising awareness in one's community, contributes to a broader culture of responsibility and resilience. Climate action, he insisted, is not reserved for the privileged or powerful; rather, it is an open invitation for all to imagine, innovate, and act. He ended with a poignant reminder drawn from a well-known proverb: humanity has not inherited the Earth from its ancestors but has instead borrowed it from future generations. With this call for urgent and sustained engagement, he left his audience with both a warning and a source of inspiration.

Open Discussion

Iktara Hassan, a student of anthropology from Independent University, Bangladesh (IUB) explained that the conference was particularly relevant to her thesis on ADDA, which examines the reimagining of urban space, social interactions, and the youth of Bangladesh. She described how opportunities for informal social gatherings in urban areas were increasingly limited. Most interactions, she noted, were confined to cafés, which required payment and allowed only short periods of engagement. These arrangements, she argued, restricted natural and spontaneous encounters, leaving young people with few alternatives for meaningful in person conversations.



She went on to reflect that such structural limitations were not merely a logistical challenge but had deeper social implications like heightened feelings of loneliness, social anxiety, and detachment among young people. She emphasised that this sense of isolation was not unique to Bangladesh but rather a growing global concern, with many young people across the world struggling to find a sense of belonging in their immediate environments. She noted that such alienation had, over time, generated a rise in apathy and reduced social engagement, and had also contributed to the gradual decline of the traditional culture of ADDA.

Ms Hassan then asked whether initiatives or platforms could be developed to address these gaps by facilitating in person interactions among youth as well as across different generations. She emphasised the importance of involving marginalised and niche communities, such as the Taatee community (people engaged in traditional weaving), which faced the threat of extinction due to limited visibility and recognition. She suggested that bringing such communities into dialogue with young people, alongside older generations, could foster intergenerational knowledge exchange and help strengthen the fabric of community life. She sought feedback from the speakers on how such initiatives might be realised.

Another participant directed attention to the issue of leadership development. While acknowledging the ongoing focus on entrepreneurship and employment, the participant raised concerns about whether sufficient attention was being paid to the ethical dimensions of leadership. She pointed out that emerging leaders were not only the leaders of tomorrow but were already exercising influence in the present. For this reason, she argued, ethical considerations should not be treated as secondary or optional but should be at the centre of how leadership is nurtured. She asked whether current initiatives were doing enough to ensure that leaders were being prepared to act responsibly and ethically in society.





A further participant addressed a question to Mr Chishty, referring to his earlier remarks on climate change. The participant asked whether present-day climate challenges should be seen as an inevitable outcome of human progress or as the result of governance failures and mismanagement. In elaborating, he drew attention to historical stages of human development, beginning with imperialism, followed by capitalism, the rise of urbanisation, and the many technological advancements witnessed in modern times, including space exploration. He questioned whether the environmental crises faced today were a natural by-product of human advancement or whether they indicated that societies had mismanaged their responsibilities in pursuit of development.

Responses by Panellists



Dr K Ayaz Rabbani

Dean and Associate Professor

School of Environment and Life Sciences, IUB

Dr K Ayaz Rabbani addressed the question concerning ethics in leadership. He observed that Bangladesh was undergoing a period of significant social and political change, particularly in the wake of the events of July, when new leaders had emerged in rapid succession. He explained that this transition provided a unique context in which questions of leadership and ethics had become especially urgent. The central issue, he argued, was how societies chose their leaders, and whether citizens were provided with genuine opportunities to make those choices.

Drawing from the lessons of the July 2024 Revolution, Dr Rabbani stressed that ethical leadership could not simply be imposed from above but depended on the values and choices of society as a whole. If the population collectively prioritised ethics, then leaders would be compelled to embody those values. Conversely, if ethics were sidelined, then the leadership that emerged would inevitably reflect that neglect. Ethical leadership, in his view, was therefore not only a matter of personal character but also the outcome of societal expectations.

He further emphasised the responsibility of young people in shaping leadership. Even when their preferred candidates or representatives were not readily available, youth had a duty to push for broader changes that could alter the available choices. He insisted that responsibility did not end with voting or selecting from existing options; it extended to actively influencing and reshaping the political environment to ensure that ethical leaders could emerge.



Mohammad Mohaiminul Kabir Chisty

Student, GSG, IUB

Mohammad Mohaiminul Kabir Chisty responded to the question on climate change. He began by asserting that climate change was, in some sense, inevitable, as it would have occurred over time regardless of human existence. However, he clarified that human activities had greatly accelerated its pace and severity, driving it into a far more problematic state than it would have been otherwise. To illustrate, he drew attention to the growing culture of consumerism. He posed a rhetorical comparison between the number of garments owned by people today and those possessed by earlier generations, such as their grandparents. He argued that this tendency towards overconsumption, fuelled by globalised supply chains, had dramatically increased carbon footprints at every stage of production and distribution. Each product, he explained, carried with it an environmental cost, with multiple regions and processes contributing to its creation.

Mr Chisty concluded that while climate change in itself was inevitable, the extent of the crisis currently being experienced was a direct result of human consumption patterns and the relentless pursuit of convenience and material comfort. In his assessment, humanity had played a decisive role in driving the climate crisis to its current scale.

Shamim Ahmed Mridha

Executive Director and Founder
Eco-Network Global



Shamim Ahmed Mridha addressed the earlier intervention made by Ms Hassan on the subject of *ADDA*. He expressed appreciation for the concerns raised and encouraged her to explore avenues of collaboration with non-governmental organisations (NGOs) already active in similar fields. He advised that the most practical way forward would be to draft proposals for specific initiatives and to approach organisations working with youth or cultural heritage.

He stressed that NGOs were often open to supporting projects that were both feasible and socially necessary. If a proposal were well-formulated and addressed a genuine need, organisations would likely be willing to help in implementing it. Mr Mridha suggested that through such collaboration, ideas like reviving *ADDA* as a cultural and social practice could move from concept to implementation, contributing positively to both youth development and community life.



Md Rafid Abrar Miah

Research Officer, BIISS

Md Rafid Abrar Miah provided a combined response to the questions on leadership and climate change. On the matter of leadership, he argued that ethical behaviour was rooted less in formal training and more in individual conscience. He stated that when individuals assume leadership roles, they are presented with multiple opportunities, and it is ultimately their responsibility to decide whether to act ethically. Ethical conduct, in his view, required the capacity to distinguish between right and wrong—a matter of basic common sense rather than advanced instruction.

On climate change, however, Mr Miah offered a perspective that diverged from the one presented by Mr Chishti. While he acknowledged the seriousness of environmental degradation, he argued that it should be understood primarily as an issue of governance and political mismanagement rather than consumer behaviour alone. He pointed out that climate change, like poverty, was often commodified, with some actors treating it as a product or service to be sold. For him, this highlighted the importance of examining the structural and governance dimensions of the crisis.

He emphasised that technological innovation should not be seen as an obstacle to sustainability, but rather as an essential component of development. However, without strong governance to regulate its impacts, innovation could exacerbate existing problems. Thus, he characterised climate change as a multi-layered governance issue requiring the engagement of multiple stakeholders, rather than a simple matter of consumption choices.

Closing Remarks by the Moderator



Dr Kazi Maruful Islam

Professor

Department of Development Studies, University of Dhaka

Dr Kazi Maruful Islam said that from the four presentations of the session, a consistent and powerful narrative emerges, highlighting the critical role of Bangladeshi youth as catalysts for national progress through entrepreneurship and climate action. The speakers collectively argued that with a significant portion of the population under the age of 35, Bangladesh possesses a historic “demographic window of opportunity”. He believed that this youth bulge, if strategically nurtured, can be transformed into a substantial demographic dividend, driving innovation, economic growth, and sustainable development.

The potential of youth is already evident in a vibrant and growing startup ecosystem, exemplified by successful ventures like Pathao, ShopUp, and 10 Minute School. These technology-driven enterprises, along with over 1,200 other active start-ups, are not only valued at billions of dollars but have also created millions of jobs, demonstrating that youth-led innovation is a powerful engine for employment and economic dynamism. Simultaneously, young people are at the forefront of addressing the climate crisis, one of Bangladesh’s most pressing challenges. From grassroots initiatives like Garbage Man converting waste into fertiliser to SOLshare pioneering peer-to-peer solar energy trading, young entrepreneurs are developing locally rooted solutions that offer environmental sustainability, economic resilience, and community empowerment.

However, this potential is constrained by significant challenges. These include high youth unemployment, a critical lack of early-stage funding and venture capital, and inadequate structured mentorship and incubation facilities, particularly outside major urban centers like Dhaka. In the realm of climate policy, young activists often face tokenism, limited inclusion in official delegations, and complex power dynamics that hinder their ability to influence national decision-making effectively.

To overcome these barriers and fully unlock the dynamism of youth, Professor Islam hoped the presentations put forward a cohesive set of recommendations. There is a strong call to build a more robust support ecosystem, which includes establishing a National Youth Innovation Fund, creating techno-hubs in each administrative division to decentralize opportunities, and integrating

entrepreneurship into educational curricula. Furthermore, there is an emphasis on enhancing youth participation in policy processes by providing platforms for engagement, improving policy literacy and negotiation skills, and positioning young people as active partners in decision-making rather than merely as future leaders. The presenters also stressed the importance of bridging the gap between activism and professional entrepreneurship, urging young people to complement their passion with practical skills, seek mentorship, and leverage international exposure for knowledge and scaling opportunities.

A central, unifying message across all presentations is the need to reconceptualise the role of youth in society. Instead of asking “what do you want to be when you grow up?” the speakers urge a shift towards asking “what problems do you want to solve?”. They conclude that by inspiring, investing in, and incubating its young population, Bangladesh can cultivate a generation of risk-takers and change-makers. Whether through scalable tech enterprises or simple, everyday climate actions, the collective power of youth, when properly supported, is deemed indispensable for leading the nation toward a prosperous, sustainable, and knowledge-driven future.

Session 3: Youth, Gender and Inclusiveness

Inclusive Economic Growth from Gender Perspective: Current Status, Challenges and Way Forward



Dr Benuka Ferdousi

Senior Research Fellow, BISS

Dr Benuka Ferdousi spoke on economic growth from a gender perspective, focusing on women's status, the challenges they face, and possible ways forward. She stressed that gender-inclusive growth should not be seen merely as a question of fairness or as a way for women to gain identity in the labour market. Drawing on global evidence, she argued that women's participation significantly strengthens economic performance. In the Organisation of Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and Nordic countries, women's labour market participation has accounted for 10 to 20 per cent of annual growth. Conversely, in Middle Eastern, North African, and some Asian countries, excluding women from economic activity has resulted in up to 38 per cent income loss. She underlined that gender-inclusive growth is therefore not just symbolic but has tangible economic returns.

She then turned to the case of Bangladesh, noting that female labour force participation has reached around 40 per cent. This figure is comparable with other South Asian countries but falls well short of the 50 to 70 per cent seen in Southeast Asia. Yet even this level does not reflect the quality of women's economic engagement. Women face an underemployment rate six times higher than men, work only 40 per cent of the hours that men do, and are disproportionately concentrated in less productive sectors. Over time, women's share of employment in non-agricultural activities declined, while their participation in agriculture has risen. In terms of employment status, women are increasingly clustered in unpaid family work and self-employment, while their presence in formal wage employment has dropped from 28.5 per cent to just 9 per cent. The gender wage gap remains substantial, with men earning, on average, 36 per cent more than women.

Dr Ferdousi highlighted further concerns by pointing to a recent decline in the total number of employed women, which fell from 24.8 million in 2022 to 22 million in 2024. Overseas employment opportunities for women, once a source of growth, have also diminished since the COVID-19 pandemic, and recovery has been limited. According to her, two major explanations stand out. The first is that Bangladesh's growth has not been employment-intensive, creating what many describe as "jobless

growth”. The second is structural transformation in sectors such as the ready-made garments industry, where technological and organisational changes have reduced demand for female workers. Alongside these, the increase in child marriage and the persistence of household responsibilities further constrain women’s economic opportunities.

She emphasised that social barriers are equally decisive. Studies by BRAC Institute of Governance and Development (BIGD) and the Asia Foundation reveal that a large share of men, and even many women, oppose female employment outside the home. As a result, many women prefer home-based work, which provides limited economic empowerment. She observed that although education raises women’s opportunity cost of not working even highly educated women are often prevented from entering the labour market because of restrictive norms.

In conclusion, Dr Ferdousi identified three key policy directions. First, Bangladesh must establish adequate childcare systems to reduce the family burden that forces many women out of employment. Second, security in workplaces must be strengthened to ensure a safe environment for women. Third, women need to be equipped with higher-quality education and skills that match the structural changes in the labour market, particularly in non-agricultural and manufacturing sectors. She reiterated that gender-inclusive growth is not only a social priority but also an economic necessity for Bangladesh’s sustainable development.

Building an Inclusive Bangladesh through Youth Power



Md Ohidujjaman

Senior Lecturer, GSG, IUB

Md Ohidujjaman began by expressing his deep connection to the topic of building an inclusive Bangladesh through youth power. He stated that he was profoundly proud to be a young person and equally proud that their nation was abundant with youth. He commenced by acknowledging the power of young people in the July 2024 uprising when they took to the streets to fight inequality, corruption, and the state of democracy in their country. He emphasised that they were not merely speaking for themselves, but for the future of the nation, which served as a perfect testament to their strength, resilience, and determination to create a better Bangladesh.

Mr Ohidujjaman proceeded to share powerful facts about Bangladesh being a nation of youth, noting that approximately 28 per cent of its population consisted of 10 to 24-year-olds, with two-thirds of the population being of working age. He described this as both a youth bulge and a demographic dividend, characterising it as a lifetime opportunity for the country. He warned that failing to utilise this opportunity would certainly be disastrous.

Addressing the challenges they faced, he highlighted youth unemployment, revealing that 7.2 per cent of the young people between 15 and 29 were unemployed, comprising nearly 2 million young people. He also pointed out that 18.9 per cent of youth were not in education, employment, or training, with 90 per cent of these being female. He described this as a wake-up call, emphasising that young women needed more support and that action must be taken to ensure they were not left behind. Additionally, he mentioned that nearly 66 per cent of students who obtained degrees from the National University were without jobs two years following graduation, which he found alarming and indicative that a degree alone was insufficient and students needed more skills, training, and additional support.

He drew attention to an often-overlooked development: the rise of Qawmi Madrasas in the country, which he identified as the fastest-growing sector of education. He noted that there were 29,000 Qawmi Madrasas with 5 million students, which had an impressively low dropout rate compared to primary or general education. However, he observed that most students came from poor economic backgrounds, and after graduation, approximately 75 per cent remained underemployed or unemployed, which he found quite alarming. He suggested that these students could be valuable assets if properly utilised, particularly given their strong Arabic language background, which could be leveraged for opportunities in Middle Eastern countries through appropriate training.

Discussing digital inequality, Mr Ohidujjaman acknowledged that while Bangladesh had made bold strides under the Digital Bangladesh vision, only 39 per cent of the population used the internet. He highlighted the disparity between urban areas, where internet access was around 71 per cent, and rural areas, where only 36 per cent of students and youth had access to the internet or digital devices, illustrating the inclusivity challenge.

Regarding climate vulnerability, he identified Bangladesh as the 9th most globally vulnerable country, with 90 million people at high risk of climate change due to issues such as salinity, cyclones, and other factors. He shared findings from his research indicating that whilst 72 per cent of youth possessed knowledge about climate change, their attitude scores were concerning, with most youth having pro-environmental attitudes well below 40 per cent. He concluded that young people need training to understand how to act, mitigate, and effectively deal with climate change.

He connected youth inclusion to the Sustainable Development Goals, arguing that without ensuring youth inclusivity, achieving goals such as quality education, decent work and economic growth, reducing inequality, climate action, and peace and justice would be very difficult. Defining inclusion, he provided examples: a girl from a remote village having the same chance to attend university as a boy from Dhaka; a disabled youth in Khulna receiving career counselling and assertive advice for success; and tribal students from Hill Tracts being able to study in their own language and potentially becoming policymakers one day.

Mr Ohidujjaman concluded by urging to have trust in youth, advocating for providing them with platforms, resources, and recognition. He emphasised that they were not the leaders of tomorrow, but the leaders of today, and should be empowered to shape Bangladesh's future. He reminded the audience that a youth dividend without inclusivity was a missed opportunity, stressing that inclusion was not a matter of charity but a smart strategy. Finally, he addressed three segments of participants: policymakers, educators, and investors or donors. He advised policymakers to incorporate youth voices into every decision, law, and reform. For educators, he emphasised the crucial role of connecting textbooks with real-world skills, teaching students how to bridge the academic field with practical applications. He called for investment in inclusive, community-driven youth programmes, expressing confidence that collaborative efforts could achieve these goals and build a Bangladesh where every young person could thrive, be supported, and empowered to lead.

Breaking Gender Norms: Contributions of Young Women in Local and International Platforms



Md Mynul Islam

Assistant Professor

Department of Women and Gender Studies, University of Dhaka

Md Mynul Islam discussed the concept of gender norms and how young women are breaking them. He emphasised that gender is often misunderstood as being synonymous with women, but in reality, it refers to socially constructed roles and expectations for both men and women.

He explained how society assigns different roles; boys are taught to be strong, decisive, and career-oriented, while girls are expected to embody “ideal womanhood” shaped by patriarchal and capitalist systems. These norms reinforce women’s marginalisation and objectification.

Challenging such norms often requires women to confront taboos and cultural discourses that confine them to domestic roles. However, many young women in Bangladesh, particularly those pursuing higher education, have already overcome significant barriers such as early marriage, poverty, and gender-based violence.

Mr Islam stressed on the importance of viewing these issues through an intersectional lens, since women’s experiences differ by class, education, and background. Violence and discrimination affect women across all social classes, though in different ways.

He urged young women to harness their collective power to bring about positive change, noting that sustainable development cannot be achieved without achieving gender equality. At the same time, he highlighted that men must be included in the process, as true transformation requires cooperation rather than retaliation.

Finally, he encouraged students and researchers to incorporate gender and intersectionality into their academic work. While intersectional analysis is complex, it is essential to capture the diverse realities of women’s experiences. Combining statistical data with personal narratives, he concluded, can create meaningful and transformative change led by youth power.

A Bitter Reality: Expectations and Aspirations among Those Not at the Table



Ahnaf Raghebin Sabbir

Student, GSG, IUB

Ahnaf Raghebin Sabbir began by sharing a story that he described as neither happy nor familiar, but bitter precisely because of its familiarity. He recounted an incident from about a month prior when two of his female friends were taking an Uber home late at night, around 11 pm. They were together, heading to a gated society, and felt reasonably safe by most standards.

He described how, around 11:30 pm, a video appeared in their group chat from one of the friends, showing the Uber driver inappropriately touching himself while driving with them inside the car. He expressed his shock and fury, immediately calling his friends to advise them to report the incident to Uber, inform their parents, and take necessary action. However, he noted their hesitance, as their parents would blame them for being outside late, the driver knew where they lived, and they were afraid, not just of what he had done, but of what he could do. He observed that the dominant response within their group was that “these things happen” and that “they should have been more careful”.

He characterised this as the bitter reality they lived in; a reality where gender-based violence was so deeply ingrained in their culture and so normalised that even victims believed they were the ones who needed to change. He argued that the fear was not irrational but institutional and generational. He questioned how they could speak of the youth dividend as if all people were standing equally at the edge of opportunity when half of them were told, subtly and sometimes violently, that they should not be seen, should not be out late, and should not take up space. He asked what kind of dividend they were harnessing when entire voices were conditioned out of existence.

Mr Sabbir shared another incident of seeing a mother and her son begging at a traffic signal. When they requested money for the son’s madrasa tuition, he tested the boy, who appeared to be 12 or 13, by asking him to multiply five by six. When the child could not answer, he reflected on what kind of future this child had in a city that spoke of Smart Bangladesh, while ignoring basic education. Although he gave them the money anyway, he pondered the disconnect between the discourse of innovation and educational reality.

Further criticising how they spoke of innovation, policy, and transformation whilst forgetting those who would never attend seminars like this, people who were part of the dividend but not of the design. He noted that when commissions were passed to protect women’s rights, they faced more male

resistance than female support, not entirely because women disagreed, but because many were afraid or too exhausted from not being heard.

He explained that being outside or invisible at the table meant that in a patriarchal society, only the masculine voice seemed to matter. In a city like Dhaka, he observed that they only centred on urban, elite, English-speaking, mobile, and predominantly male youth. However, he emphasised that the youth dividend did not belong to one group—it included women trapped between fear and blame, boys denied education, and young people whose stories they were too uncomfortable to hear.

Mr Sabbir argued that they could not claim to harness this demographic gift while ignoring those they failed to represent or protect. He proposed beginning by shifting the lens, asking who was not in the room, who could not speak, and when they did speak, who listened. He called for creating platforms with protection, providing opportunities with access, and seeking inclusion with transformation. This meant rethinking policy design to ensure it was not just heard in English at conferences but translated into the lived realities of youth in slums, madrasas, rural homes, and unsafe cities. He emphasised making space for stories that indicted systems rather than comforting them.

He concluded by stating that he came not with solutions but with truths. As a student of global studies and governance, he had observed how often the expectations placed on youth ignored the realities they inherited. He declared that the youth dividend was neither automatic nor inevitable; it was a test, and they were failing it if they left people behind. He insisted that to truly harness the youth dividend, they must start by listening to those who had been excluded not just from opportunities, but from the conversation itself, because if they were not at the table, they were not building a future worth sharing.

Open Discussion



Shahriar Mohammad Shanto from the Department of Global Studies and Governance, IUB, asked the faculty members and the guest why public university curricula in Bangladesh placed limited emphasis on basic computer fundamentals, despite their importance for students' future careers and adaptability in modern workplaces. He mentioned that the country has nearly 55 public universities with around 4.4 million students and sought suggestions on how universities could address this gap.

Mohammad Mohaiminul Kabir Chisty directed a question to Ahnaf Raghebin Sabbir. He asked how individuals who were not part of the main discussion could still be included in it.



Another participant raised a concern regarding the lack of institutional structures in Bangladesh to support working women. She reflected on her personal experience as the daughter of a working mother, explaining the challenges of balancing household responsibilities and professional work. She compared her experience in Japan, where quality and accessible day-care facilities were available, with the situation in Bangladesh, where few such services existed and most were unaffordable for the majority. She questioned why neither the government nor NGOs were providing adequate day-care facilities to enable women to remain in the workforce, instead of being forced to leave their jobs to care for children.



Responses from the Panellists



Md Mynul Islam

Assistant Professor

Department of Women and Gender Studies, University of Dhaka

Md Mynul Islam responded that the issue of child-care was indeed important and closely linked to women's careers. He observed that although some government and NGO initiatives existed, most of the organisations still lacked proper facilities, causing women to face difficulties. He argued that the problem could not be solved merely by establishing day-care centres but required addressing deeper issues such as unequal household responsibilities. Drawing from his own experience, he explained that unless husbands and wives shared domestic tasks equitably, work, family conflicts would persist.



Dr Benuka Ferdousi

Senior Research Fellow, BIISS

Dr Benuka Ferdousi commented that while she partially agreed with the previous point, she disagreed that the problem could be addressed only at the household level. She emphasised the importance of government and institutional initiatives, noting that the lack of basic facilities had already driven many women out of the workforce. She argued that while social norms also needed to change, introducing facilities was the easier and more immediate solution, and both should proceed simultaneously.



Ahnaf Raghebin Sabbir

Student, GSG, IUB

Ahnaf Raghebin Sabbir responded to Mr Chisty's question by stating that inclusion required institutional change, ideally driven by youth. He acknowledged that inclusion was not easy but emphasised that the long-term rewards would be significant.



Md Ohidujjaman

Senior Lecturer

Department of Global Studies and Governance, IUB

Md Ohidujjaman added that structural changes were essential for meaningful progress. He noted that merely raising awareness would not suffice, and the government and other stakeholders needed to take proactive steps. He emphasised the importance of ensuring safe and high-quality day-care facilities, mentioning a tragic incident at a government-run centre in Azimpur as an example of poor standards. He suggested that government offices, corporate houses, and NGOs should all contribute, possibly through coordinated efforts or community-based initiatives. For instance, companies with a significant number of female employees could be required to provide day-care facilities.

He further reflected on the role of basic computer education, agreeing with Mr Shanto's earlier question. He highlighted that while universities like IUB had integrated courses with laboratory work, public and national universities faced greater challenges. He suggested that computer literacy should be introduced at the primary and secondary school levels, rather than waiting until university, as such skills had become essential in the context of the fourth and fifth industrial revolutions.

Summing up by the Moderator



Shaheen Anam

Executive Director
Manusher Jonno Foundation (MJF)

The session was moderated by Shaheen Anam who began by framing the central theme of youth, gender and inclusiveness. She highlighted that genuine inclusiveness cannot exist without gender equality. In her view, inclusiveness must extend beyond rhetoric to ensure legal rights, access to services, and opportunities for all, irrespective of gender.

Following the presentations, the moderator offered brief reflections. She noted that the first paper underscored the importance of investing in women as means to stimulate national economic growth, emphasising equal access to opportunities for both men and women. Commenting on the second presentation, she pointed to the stark inequalities within the education system, particularly between different standards and institutions, and warned of the risks this divide poses for the future. Her remarks on the third contribution acknowledged the issue of marginalisation, stressing how certain groups continue to fall through the cracks despite efforts towards inclusion.

In her closing remarks, Ms Anam commended the panellists for their thought-provoking contributions, though she regretted that time constraints limited fuller discussion. She observed that despite women constituting a significant proportion of the labour force, many remain confined to the informal sector, often underemployed and undervalued. This, she argued, prevents the country from harnessing the true potential of half its population in contributing to economic growth and development.

She further drew attention to disparities between urban and rural contexts, as well as the digital divide and unequal access to education, all of which exacerbate inequality. Inclusiveness, she emphasised, must be understood in all its diversity, acknowledging the specific challenges faced by women with disabilities, those living in climate-vulnerable regions, and women from low-income groups.

The moderator underlined the need to break entrenched gender norms, arguing that attitudinal change is a prerequisite for meaningful inclusion. She expressed grave concern over child marriage, citing statistics that 51 per cent of girls in Bangladesh are married before the age of 18, effectively curtailing their potential. She also highlighted findings that at least 75 per cent of women experience domestic violence during their lifetime, a reflection of the deeply rooted social barriers to women's empowerment.

Ms Anam also noted the unrecognised labour of women engaged in unpaid household and agricultural work, which remains absent from official statistics and national accounts despite its significant contribution. For her, gender inclusion requires a societal shift that values women's contributions in both public and private spheres.

She concluded by stressing the need to extend these conversations beyond academic and policy circles, ensuring that broader society understands the importance of gender equality for national development. Drawing on recent examples of youth-led movements, she pointed out how women often lead from the front but risk being marginalised afterwards, underscoring the long road ahead in achieving inclusivity and equality.

Closing Session

Remarks by the Distinguished Guest



Professor Dr M Tamim

Vice Chancellor

Independent University, Bangladesh (IUB)

Professor Dr M Tamim addressed the seminar's topic of harnessing Bangladesh's youth dividend and future imperatives in a changing world. He began by referencing China's exploitation of its population dividend and demographic dividend, noting how it had utilised that dividend to elevate the nation to a different level. He observed that India and Bangladesh had very similar situations and were actually better positioned than China when it started. He pointed out that China was now declining, its youth population was no longer growing, and its overall population was declining, leading to shifts in Chinese manufacturing and other economic activities.

He attributed the July uprising primarily to economic disparity and lack of employment, particularly youth employment, noting that the original protest was against a quota system. He explained that the shrinkage of job opportunities had created tremendous frustration amongst their youth, which was still prevailing. He described witnessing growth without employment, referencing his research papers that examined energy requirements, growth, and GDP growth portrayed at that time. His analysis revealed that the industrial contribution to GDP remained the same or actually declined, and youth employment had been flat since 2017, with no increase at all. He explained that all the growth that had occurred was due to investment in mega projects —large infrastructure investments that created GDP growth without corresponding growth in manufacturing. He noted that the service sector, which had been just 12-13 per cent in 1972-73, had now grown to almost 60 per cent over the past 50 years. Meanwhile, the industrial sector remained stagnant at about 30-33per cent contribution, and agriculture had declined from a high of 50 per cent to 13 per cent of the economy.

Addressing how to engage their young population and elevate their country, he acknowledged multiple challenges, particularly in education, stating that traditional education was failing them and needed to change. He emphasised the need to create a workforce that would serve their national aspirations, questioning what those aspirations actually were and where they wanted to grow. He wondered whether they were developing the IT sector or planning to become a chip-making nation, noting that they did not even manufacture regular household appliances, while Chinese appliances flooded their market despite having a large enough market for their own production.

Dr Tamim argued that without national objectives for growth and a clear direction, they could not prepare an appropriate workforce. He insisted that workforce and human resources development needed to be centrally surveyed, if not organised, to meet their aspirations. Discussing employability, he noted claims about jobs being performed by foreign nationals but observed that no single study identified the areas or jobs being done by foreigners. He described employers saying they had many job seekers but could not find suitable candidates, necessitating bringing workers from India, Sri Lanka, China, and Korea, while having hundreds of thousands of unemployed youths. He declared that they had failed their youth as a nation, failing to train them, educate them properly, and connect their education to market requirements. He acknowledged that this would not be an easy task and mentioned other important issues like sustainability, climate change, and gender, while emphasising that for Bangladesh's development, workforce development, and youth employment, the problem lay elsewhere and was bigger.

He discussed skill gaps amongst graduates, mentioning efforts to conduct skill mapping for each department and skill gap mapping to understand field requirements versus university teaching. He emphasised the importance of computer literacy, noting that public universities were lagging behind in this area, which was problematic since it had become part of basic education.

Dr Tamim strongly advocated for Bangladesh to have a human resource development division or ministry whose sole job would be mapping the entire education industry network and connectivity. He cited India's example, where universities were ranked by the Ministry of Education using their own ranking system, with the Ministry of Industry being the primary user of this ranking system, thus connecting university rankings to industry requirements. He argued that without making these fundamental changes, youth employment would remain unfulfilled. Whilst acknowledging efforts to encourage entrepreneurship, he emphasised that this should not be limited to city students but should encompass youth throughout the entire country with different types of education who were becoming frustrated.

He concluded by stressing that unless they could satisfy their youth by employing and engaging them through education, training, and ultimately jobs, they would not be able to advance. He appreciated the topic's importance and the collaborative effort between the Department of Global Studies and Governance and BIISS, noting that continued discussion would help important issues surface and come to the forefront. Sharing a personal anecdote, he mentioned his young daughter, who had graduated and asked him daily for job assistance, expressing his uncertainty about where to find employment for her. He acknowledged that graduating students faced similar concerns about their future prospects. Regarding gender issues discussed earlier, he agreed that the principal reason for Bangladeshi professional women leaving the workforce after obtaining degrees was to raise children. He identified this as requiring both husband support and institutional structural support, knowing that many women would work if they had childcare support, while acknowledging the stigma that "women cannot work after marriage", which he believed could be overcome.

Speech by the Guest of Honour



Dr Saima Khan

Country Director, UNAIDS

Dr Saima Khan reflected on the relevance of her HIV-related work in the context of the dialogue. She explained that HIV prevention requires working with some of the most marginalised and invisible groups in society—sex workers, men who have sex with men, transgender people, and drug users—who are rarely included in official services or population counts. In Bangladesh, this group numbers about 300,000 sex workers and key populations, but if all drug users are included, the figure rises close to 8 million.

She emphasised that these groups face extreme levels of violence and discrimination. While a national survey shows that over 50 per cent of Bangladeshi women experience violence in their lifetime, the rate among sex workers and transgender women is estimated to be 80–90 per cent. Many enter sex work or leave school at a very young age, not by choice but due to exclusion, bullying, and lack of support. Yet society continues to stigmatise them, treating them as “others” or disease carriers, rather than as human beings.

Dr Khan urged the younger generation—the “future change makers” of Bangladesh—to challenge these stigmas and discriminatory outlooks that her generation has failed to overcome. She called on youth to adopt an open mind, recognise the humanity of all people, and contribute to building a society where dignity and inclusion replace exclusion and prejudice. She concluded by expressing hope that the future leadership of Bangladesh will advance this change.

Closing Remarks by the Moderator



Shaheen Anam

Executive Director
Manusher Jonno Foundation (MJF)

Finally, the Moderator, Shaheen Anam, concluded by thanking the panellists and acknowledging that time constraints had prevented deeper discussion of all the papers. She reflected on the difficulties women faced in the labour market, including underemployment, widespread participation in the informal sector, and the lack of institutional recognition of women's unpaid contributions, particularly in agriculture and household work. She warned that disparities such as the rural-urban divide and unequal access to digital and educational resources were creating deeper inequalities in society.

Shaheen Anam further stressed that women were not a homogeneous group and faced diverse challenges depending on factors such as income level, disability, and climate vulnerability. She underlined the importance of breaking entrenched gender norms, pointing to statistics showing that 51 per cent of girls in Bangladesh were married before the age of 18, and that 75 per cent of women had faced domestic violence at least once in their lifetime. She argued that without changes in societal attitudes, women's inclusion would remain limited.

In conclusion, she referred to the July movement of the previous year, where youth and women played prominent roles, only for women to later be sidelined. She observed that this reflected the broader reality of gender inequality in society, and urged for stronger, more inclusive efforts to push boundaries and ensure equality.

Vote of Thanks



Major General Iftekhar Anis, BSP, awc, afwc, psc, PEng

Director General

Bangladesh Institute of International and Strategic Studies (BIISS)

Major General Iftekhar Anis began his vote of thanks by expressing that it was both an honour and a privilege for him to offer gratitude on behalf of the Bangladesh Institute of International and Strategic Studies, as they brought the dynamic and thought-provoking seminar to a close. He described the day's event on harnessing Bangladesh's youth dividend and future imperatives in a changing world as a timely initiative that had successfully brought together policymakers, academics, diplomats, students, and young changemakers to discuss one of the most crucial themes of their time: how to empower and enable youth to shape Bangladesh's future.

He began his appreciation by expressing deep gratitude to the Chief Guest, His Excellency Mr Ghanashyam Bhandari, Ambassador of Nepal to the People's Republic of Bangladesh, for his gracious presence and thoughtful remarks that had added a regional perspective to their discussion. He extended equal gratitude to the Special Guest, the Secretary (East and West) of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, whose encouragement had been truly inspiring. Major General Anis offered heartfelt thanks to the Guest of Honour, Dr Saima Khan, Country Director of UNAIDS, for sharing meaningful insights on youth engagement regarding a very pertinent issue which was often overlooked. He especially thanked Professor Dr M Tamim, the honourable Vice Chancellor of Independent University, Bangladesh (IUB), for joining them and for his continued support and encouragement in making the collaboration between BIISS and IUB so meaningful. He deeply appreciated his leadership in promoting youth-centric academic engagement.

His sincere gratitude extended to the distinguished moderators and speakers across the three excellent sessions. He praised the depth and diversity of ideas presented, which ranged from soft power and international branding to entrepreneurship, climate innovation, gender inclusivity, and development vision, describing them as truly enriching. Major General Anis further thanked their partners at IUB, particularly the Department of Global Studies and Governance and the School of Liberal Arts and Social Sciences, for their outstanding collaboration, hospitality, and tireless behind-the-scenes efforts. He also acknowledged Professor Dr Bokhtiar Ahmed, Dean of the School, for his constant support and engagement.

Addressing the young participants and students, he declared them to be the future and emphasised that the seminar had been designed for them. He expressed that their curiosity, questions, and participation had given him hope and direction, urging them to continue asking critical questions, thinking boldly, and stepping forward to lead. He acknowledged with gratitude the presence of media friends and press members, as well as the communications team, for helping amplify the day's important messages. Finally, he thanked the dedicated colleagues of BIIS who whose efficient coordination had made the seminar successful. Looking forward, he announced that the outcomes of the day's discussions would be documented and disseminated through a comprehensive seminar report and publication that would capture key insights for broader policy and academic use. Finally, he concluded by encouraging them to leave with a renewed commitment to support their youth not merely as beneficiaries of development but as architects of the nation's future. He expressed hope that their youth would rise with knowledge, confidence, and responsibility to build a brighter, more inclusive, and resilient Bangladesh.



Professor Dr Bokhtiar Ahmed

Dean

School of Liberal Arts and Social Sciences

Independent University, Bangladesh (IUB)

Professor Dr Bokhtiar Ahmed acknowledged that they had gathered for the day-long seminar to discuss and explore what he considered perhaps the most important potential of their nation: the youth dividend. He described it as a time-sensitive opportunity that a nation could expect only once over a few centuries. He explained that if harnessed productively, it would lead to economic growth, innovation, and social transformation, but if missed, it could fuel unemployment, instability, and discontent.

As a university with over 11,000 students, he positioned IUB as a significant stakeholder in this national transformation. He described the School of Liberal Arts and Social Sciences as committed to nurturing students as changemakers with human values, global vision, and critical insights into society and cultures. He explained that the school inspired students to act as socially and environmentally responsible members of their community, while being driven by emotional intelligence. He characterised the seminar as a perfect occasion to connect their dreams and aspirations with national goals and visions, particularly what he considered a very significant point in history, when their youth had led a fundamental shift in their imagination of the national future. As Dean, he thanked the Bangladesh Institute of International and Strategic Studies for partnering with them in the venture of including youth in national policy discourse, which he deemed very important in the context of global shifts driven by the Fourth Industrial Revolution, artificial intelligence, climate change, and changes in the global economy and politics.

Dr Bokhtiar noted that Bangladesh's transition from LDC to a developing country also required a shift in its mindset and strategy regarding the youth dividend. He emphasised that their youth needed to be future-ready to navigate global competitiveness, which involved education reform, job creation and entrepreneurship, digital inclusion, health and wellbeing, gender equity, and, most importantly, civic engagement and leadership. He thanked all distinguished presenters, discussants, and session chairs for facilitating insightful scholarship on aspects of such transformation. He reiterated that the youth dividend could be the most fortunate bonus for a nation like theirs if youth were effectively engaged in transformative change. However, he warned that inaction and inhibition could result in rising youth unemployment, social unrest, extremism, intolerance, as well as brain drain, economic stagnation, and widespread frustration.

For a nation at such a demographic crossroads, he declared that strategic, inclusive investment in youth was not optional but essential. He emphasised that every decision made would shape the nation's trajectory for the next 30 years, making empowering youth the best long-term strategy for sustainable development and global competitiveness. He congratulated and appreciated the students who had joined the day's sessions, asserting that their thoughts and actions would surely define their collective future. He thanked the Department of Global Studies and Governance for leading this meaningful partnership, particularly acknowledging the Head of the Department, Dr Marufa Akhter. He also thanked IUB management for their support in this remarkable collaboration and expressed anticipation for future collaborations with BIIS and other actors.

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