



Policy Brief

Barriers, Ballots & Beyond: Empowering Vulnerable Youth Towards Inclusive Electoral & Political Participation

A Youth-Informed Policy Brief on Inclusive Electoral Participation in Bangladesh

This brief is grounded in direct consultations with marginalized youth and presents their experiences, priorities, and recommendations without reinterpretation, ensuring youth voices shape policy decisions ahead of the 2026 national election.

Background

The 2026 national election represents a critical democratic milestone, with more than 4.5 million first-time youth voters. Despite improvements in electoral access, many youth—particularly Indigenous, Dalit, Bihari, Tea Garden, economically marginalized, nomadic, youth with disabilities, and activist groups—continue to face structural and institutional barriers. These include language exclusion, poverty, political marginalization, mobility constraints, and low trust in institutions.

Current approaches often treat youth as a homogeneous group, overlooking intersecting vulnerabilities. The Barriers, Ballots & Beyond project, implemented by Youth Policy Forum, supported by the UNDP BALLOT Project generates youth-led evidence to inform practical policy actions that enhance inclusion of youth in democratic process.

Methodology

The study applied a mixed-methods approach, combining a nationwide survey of 700 marginalized youth and CSOs with participatory workshops and consultation held in Dhaka and Sylhet. Twelve marginalized youth groups participated, including Indigenous (plain land), Dalit, Tea Garden, Bihari, youth with disabilities, economically vulnerable youth, and youth leaders. Stratified sampling ensured representation across diverse vulnerable communities.



Key Findings

Political and Institutional Barriers

- Trust in electoral institutions is low, with an average score of 2.4 out of 5, indicating weak perceptions of representation and protection.
- Youth distrust is driven by security concerns, historical marginalization, language and cultural exclusion, land rights issues, and unequal access to public services.
- Errors in National ID (NID) documents restrict voter registration and voting, particularly for marginalized groups.
- These errors are largely due to poor orientation and training of officials on minority names, titles, and identities.



Social Exclusion and Safety Concerns

- Fear significantly suppresses participation: 58% of Indigenous youth feel unsafe discussing politics locally.
- 78% of all respondents avoid expressing political views online due to fear of harassment.
- Dalit and Bihari youth experience heightened stigma, backlash, and social exclusion.
- 27% of youth lack confidence that governance systems can address their community-specific concerns.

Gender Barriers:

- Voter registration systems do not adequately accommodate relocation, particularly after marriage.
- Among young women, 48% cite household responsibilities and family or community discouragement as major barriers.
- These barriers are reinforced by patriarchy, fear of harassment, and restrictions on mobility.

Media, Information, and Digital Barriers

- Awareness of referendum processes is critically low: 36% are unaware, 39% have superficial knowledge, and only 5.2% understand key issues.
- Access to credible political information is limited: 23% have no access, 30% have limited access, and 28% do not know their local politicians or mandates.
- Misinformation is widespread: 63.3% report being exposed at least occasionally.
- Over 60% believe AI-generated content will influence the election.

Socio Cultural Barriers

- Language barriers affect over 20% of youth, as electoral materials are mainly in formal Bengali and political discourse is overly academic.
- Voter registration systems do not adequately accommodate relocation, particularly after marriage.
- Among young women, 48% cite household responsibilities and family or community discouragement as major barriers.
- These barriers are reinforced by patriarchy, fear of harassment, and restrictions on mobility.

Economic Barriers

- Voting is economically burdensome for 36.2% of respondents due to lost wages, transport costs, and work disruption.
- Economic vulnerability increases susceptibility to manipulation, with 88% reporting that monetary incentives influence voters.

Geographic and Mobility Barriers

- 34% of youth have voter registration addresses different from their current residence.
- Mobility-related barriers are most severe for youth in remote, hilly, and underserved areas, as well as for nomadic and highly mobile communities.

Policy Recommendations

Immediate Actions

- Deploy visible and heightened security at identified electoral hotspots, coordinated by law enforcement, local administration, and the Election Commission, including emergency helplines and rapid response teams.
- Provide sensitization training and special protection protocols for election officials working with women, Dalit, Bihari, Indigenous, and other marginalized groups.
- Enforce political party compliance with codes of conduct, including immediate action against vote-buying, coercion, harassment, and intimidation.
- Disseminate simplified, multilingual, and locally understandable electoral information on candidates, manifestos, referendums, and voting procedures through community meetings, local media, and audio-visual or pictorial formats.
- Train district-level fact-checkers to counter misinformation, including AI-generated content, and require political parties to produce accessible audio versions of manifestos.
- Integrate existing Election Commission digital platforms into a single accessible national platform with real-time fact-checking and disability-inclusive design.
- Provide organized transport and transparent wage-loss support for daily laborers in remote and underserved regions.
- Pilot mobile polling booths, flexible voter registration, and location-flexible voting options for high-mobility populations.
- Conduct community-based civic engagement activities such as courtyard meetings, mock voting, and dialogue sessions, recruiting volunteers and polling agents from marginalized communities.

Intermediate Reforms

- Establish sustained dialogue platforms in marginalized regions to address service delivery, land rights and safety concerns that extend beyond election cycles.
- Strengthen inclusive electoral governance by increasing nominations of marginalized groups and women, developing localized manifestos, maintaining community liaison teams, and publicly reporting compliance with codes of conduct.
- Mandate anti-discrimination training for election officials and party agents, establish a permanent multilingual unit within the Election Commission, and require standardized inclusion audits for all polling centers.
- Require political parties to adopt safeguarding policies, train cadres, and publicly disclose violations and corrective actions.
- Integrate civic and electoral education into formal and non-formal curricula, including nationwide mock elections.
- Address economic vulnerability by integrating electoral participation costs into social protection and labor policies.
- Publish post-election district-level inclusion scorecards tracking minority turnout, safety incidents, NID error resolution, and exposure to misinformation.



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