

Our Future, Our Rights, Our Voices

Adolescents and young people in South Asia reimagine a better, more prosperous future for all

We - the adolescents and young people of South Asia - have dreams and hopes of a better world.

We come from many different backgrounds and communities. From remote mountain villages, impoverished city slums, and fragile coastal communities. Many of us already have to work, others are in school, and some of us do both. Some of us have no chance to work or study. Many of us are survivors - of violence, of exploitation, of poverty, of discrimination. Some of us live with disabilities, and some belong to LGBTQI+ communities. And yet we are still helping to build a better world for the rest of us.

Many of us have felt the terrifying effects of climate change, especially those of us who live in poor, marginalized communities. Unpredictable and extreme weather is destroying our homes. Selfish, irresponsible behaviour is suffocating our planet. Yet we don't sense any urgency from our leaders to address climate change. We feel we are being robbed of our dream to live in a cleaner, greener world.

That's the case of Naureen, 17. She describes her country, Maldives, as a "paradise on earth". She says: "We are famed for our white sandy beaches and our clear turquoise waters. However, global warming and sea level rise are eroding our islands to the size of a watermelon seed."

Meanwhile, on the coast of Bangladesh, Tahera and her community are facing an acute shortage of drinking water. Every day, girls like her walk two hours to fetch water - time they would much rather spend studying. During the flood season, children like her wade to school, risking infection from waterborne diseases. She has witnessed lives being lost and families being displaced.

The COVID-19 pandemic has made our situation much worse. The jobs that fed our families, and the health services that saved our pregnant mothers and little sisters and brothers, are no longer there. Our schools have been closed, often for months at a time. Many of us may never return to school. Some of us are forced to work or are subjected to violence and abuse. Many girls among us are being pushed into early marriage against our will. We are suffering from isolation and our mental wellbeing is deteriorating.

Those of us living in rural areas and in impoverished communities are the worst affected. We want to continue learning online but our parents cannot always afford mobile devices or internet charges. For those of us who do manage to get online, unreliable, and slow networks make it hard for us to keep up with our classes.

The experience of Simran, from a tribal community in India, is not unusual. Passionate about learning, her family sold prized possessions to allow her to continue her education. But when learning went online during the pandemic, Simran and other marginalized girls began to fall behind, because families prioritized boys when it came to use of their precious digital devices.

Some of us need to work alongside learning. Anjali says: "For our brothers and sisters to be able to go to school, to afford medicine for our grandparents and to take care of our family, we have to work. Our situation will not improve without addressing the root problems that push us to work."

These are not the only reasons so many of us will never achieve our dream of a quality job, stable income, and the chance to lead a decent life. Our education curricula do not give us the skills we need to get good jobs. Especially for those of us living in rural and marginalized areas, quality education, skills, vocational training and employment opportunities remain a distant dream.

The girls among us have it particularly rough. If we avoid the perils of child marriage, violence, or early pregnancy we may still be prevented from going to school. For the lucky ones who get to go to school and find jobs, prejudice and discrimination can still block us from making headway in our careers.

The path to success is even more fraught for those of us who suffer discrimination. Women, LGBTQI+ communities, people with disabilities and marginalized communities all face prejudice in the workplace. As Jony, a non-binary youth, shared: "Too often, we don't get credit for our knowledge and skills, and get rejected from jobs because they are not considered 'appropriate' for us."

It is time for such discrimination to end. It is time for all of us to be able to go to school, build our skills and have dignified employment opportunities.

We fear for our future, yet we cling to hopes of a better one - a future where we can reach our full potential. We are survivors and we need you beside us. We look upon you all - our governments, our leaders, our carers, for support.

We are here today to urge you to do the following:

- **Involve young boys and girls in revising the laws, policies and programmes that concern us.** We want to be included in decision-making processes, to which we can bring valuable insights. For example, with our first-hand knowledge and experience, our ability to innovate and create new solutions, we can help develop policies that protect and uplift girls and boys who are forced to work.
- **Invest in digital skills for youth and begin to bridge the digital divide.** Help make digital devices more accessible and internet connectivity affordable and reliable, while ensuring the online experience is safe. Support our teachers to continue teaching us in all circumstances, including online.
- **Develop education curricula fit for a greener and digital world.** We need curricula that includes the skills needed for jobs in the digital world. Climate education should begin in primary school so that we have the knowledge and skills needed to take action and speak for our right to a healthy and safe environment.
- **Support youth entrepreneurship and investments in green and sustainable innovations.** We have brilliant minds among us who are excited about and committed to transforming the world we live in. Seed funds, incubation centres, and tax subsidies can help us get these innovations off the ground. Together, we can reach our goal of sustainable, cleaner, safer and healthier cities and villages.
- **Lastly, vigorously enforce laws that combat discrimination against girls and women, people with disabilities, marginalized communities and LGBTQI+ youth.** Disadvantaged groups deserve to feel protected and empowered to reclaim their rights to education, health, employment, equal pay and fair conditions at work.

With your action, we can transform the lives of young people in South Asia.

The time for that action is now.

Thank you.

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