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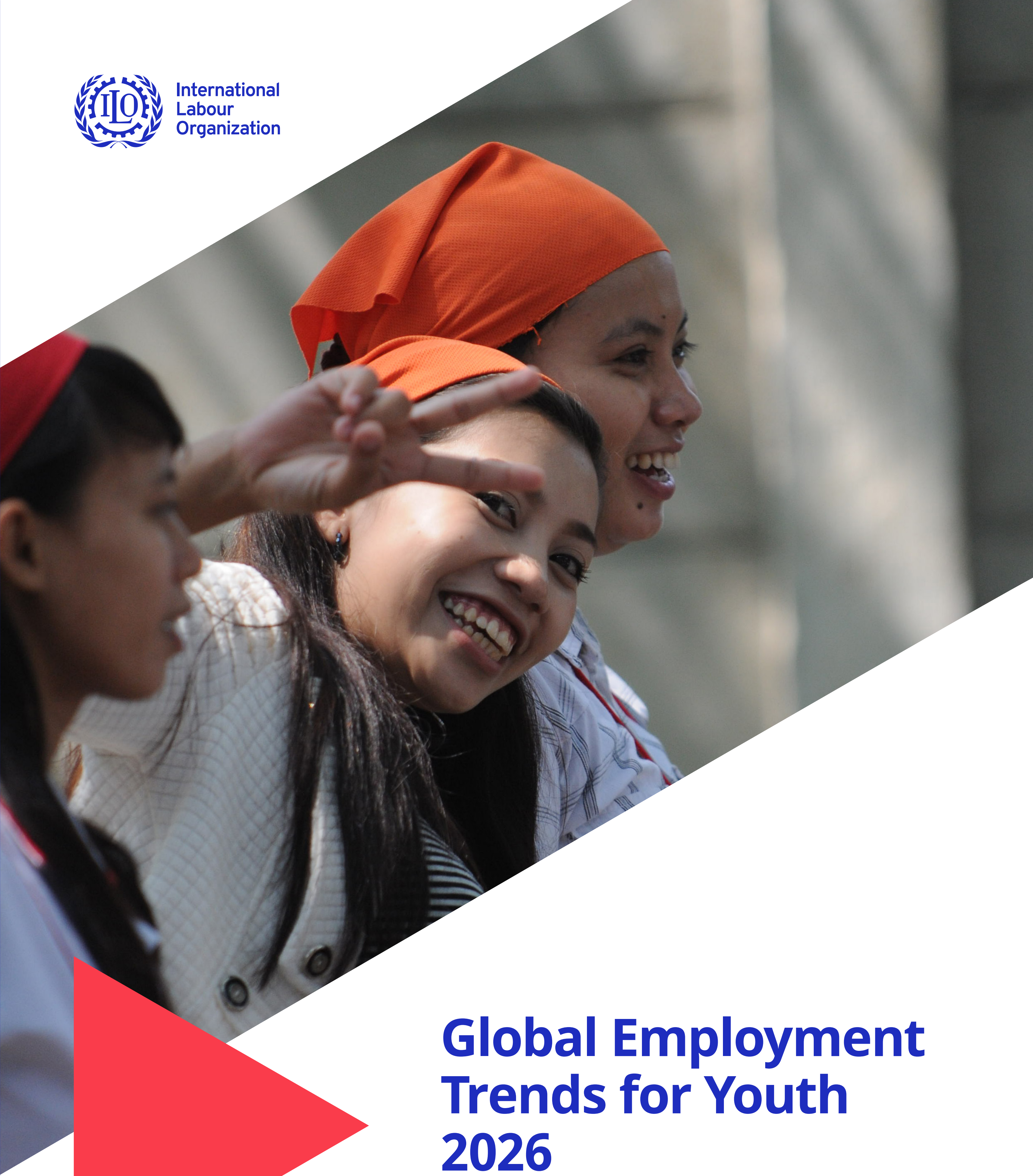

Global Employment Trends for Youth 2026

Back to the future

Executive summary

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A rocky road for young people and labour market entry ...

The tentative, and short-lived, recovery in youth labour markets that followed the COVID-19 pandemic has stalled. This edition of the *Global Employment Trends for Youth (GET for Youth)* finds that slowing global economic growth, diminished job creation, geopolitical tensions and rapid technological change are combining to make the transition from school to decent work increasingly difficult for many young people.

After reaching its lowest level in more than two decades in 2023, the global unemployment rate of young people aged 15 to 24 edged up to 12.4 per cent in 2025, equalling 67 million unemployed young people worldwide. The global share of young people not in employment, education or training (NEET) is also again on the rise, reaching 20 per cent in 2025 from 19.7 per cent in 2023. This translated into an increase of 9 million more young people in NEET status since 2023, bringing the total to 257 million in 2025. With many more young people implicated and with youth disengagement harder to redress,[1] the increasing trend in the youth NEET rate is especially worrisome.

... with rising youth unemployment rates in almost all the world's regions.

Unlike in previous editions of the *GET for Youth*, where the trends on the main labour market indicators varied widely across subregions, the worsening results on job entry for young people have been almost universal over the past couple of years. The youth unemployment rate rose between 2023 and 2025 in 8 of the 11 subregions, as well as in high-income, lower-middle-income and low-income countries (table ES.1). The largest increases were in Northern Africa, Northern America and Northern, Southern and Western Europe.

In Central and Western Asia and Eastern Europe, and in upper-middle-income countries, the "good news" of declining youth unemployment rate was muted by the rise in youth in NEET status. And while Latin America and the Caribbean stood out as the only region to show a decline in both the youth unemployment rate and youth NEET rate, further analysis showed that results were driven in part by declining youth population sizes and that most countries in the subregion showed worsening trends in youth labour market engagement.

Gender gaps remain entrenched; young men still have the advantage in labour market entry.

The NEET challenge has a female face in almost all subregions of the world. Still in 2025, more than two out of every three youth in NEET status were women and, at 27.4 per cent, the NEET rate of young women was more than double that of young men (at 13.1 per cent). Globally, the increase in the NEET rate since 2023 was slightly steeper for young women than young men (rising by 0.5 percentage points and 0.2 percentage points, respectively), thus expanding the gender gap even further.

On the contrary, the gender gap in the share of young people in employment narrowed slightly. Yet, the employment-to-population ratio of young men (at 43.3 per cent) was still nearly 13 percentage points higher than that of young women (at 30.6 per cent) in 2025. This gap is not related to unequal access to education – young men and women are now on par when it comes to school enrolment

1 This statement reflects the differing degree of labour market attachment. A young person who is unemployed is, by definition, available to work and actively seeking work. This means they maintain an attachment to the labour market. However, a young person in NEET status is outside the labour market – neither working nor seeking work and not engaged in education or training. They are both more numerous than unemployed youth and more challenging to draw back into the folds of economic activity or schooling through policies in programmes.

rates – but rather to the significantly higher propensity of young women to be in NEET status due to (out-of-school) inactivity. Persistent barriers related to unpaid care responsibilities, discrimination and limited access to quality employment continue to constrain the economic participation of young women, particularly in the Arab States, Northern Africa and Southern Asia.

▶ Table ES.1. Trends in youth unemployment rate and youth NEET rate, by subregion and country income group, 2023–25

	Subregions	Country income groups
Rising YUR, rising NEET rate	Arab States Eastern Asia Northern Africa Northern America Northern, Southern and Western Europe Southern Asia South-Eastern Asia and the Pacific Sub-Saharan Africa	High-income Lower-middle-income Low-income
Declining YUR, rising NEET rate	Central and Western Asia Eastern Europe	Upper-middle-income
Declining YUR, null or declining NEET rate	Latin America and the Caribbean	–

Key: NEET = not in employment, education or training; YUR = youth unemployment rate.

The struggle of young people to access decent work is discouraging youth labour market participation in developing subregions.

The Arab States and Northern Africa are consistently the subregions with the world's highest youth unemployment rates. In the two subregions, more than one in five economically active young people struggle to find work (youth unemployment rates of 26.2 per cent and 22.6 per cent, respectively) and at least one in three young people is in NEET status (NEET rates of 32.4 per cent and 30.1 per cent, respectively). When these indicators continue to rise from already high levels, it signals a deepening of the already well-rooted structural barriers that push young talent – young women particularly – to the margins of productive society.

The situation of young people in sub-Saharan Africa represents another extreme. The youth unemployment rate of the subregion was 8.4 per cent in 2025, 4 percentage points below the global average. The NEET rate in the subregion, however, was just above the global average at 21.6 per cent. Low (but rising) youth unemployment rates in sub-Saharan Africa reflect the context in which few young people can afford to be without work. Most young people need to generate an income and have to take up informal jobs that fall outside the realm of social protection and job (or income) stability. Nearly nine in ten young workers in low- and lower-middle-income countries (many of which are in sub-Saharan Africa) remain in informal employment, and two in three were still in a form of insecure work (as own-account workers or temporary paid workers) as young adults (aged 25 to 29).

The population pressure in sub-Saharan Africa is notably heavy. Nearly two thirds of the increase in the global youth population now accrues to the subregion, and it will continue in the near future. With millions of young labour market entrants already competing for a limited number of decent jobs and with population pressures continuing, the rising NEET rate in sub-Saharan Africa is a signal of growing youth discouragement.

The growing hardship of labour market entry in high-income countries is a relatively recent phenomenon.

Young people in high-income countries typically have access to more secure forms of work. Formal employment is the norm (only 11.7 per cent work informally), as is engagement in more secure forms of work like paid employment with a contract duration greater than one year (75 per cent of young adult workers in high-income countries are in secure forms of work). Nonetheless, the pathway to access such jobs has also become increasingly difficult for young people in high-income countries. The increase in the youth unemployment rate was especially high in Northern America, rising from 8.3 per cent in 2023 to 9.8 per cent in 2025. Northern, Southern and Western Europe saw a smaller increase, but with the rate remaining at a high level in 2025 (at 15 per cent). Of the 29 countries in the subregion, 20 saw a worsening in the capacity of their economies to absorb young talent and offer them decent job opportunities.

Young people who finished school or training at the secondary level in these two subregions and in Eastern Europe are those confronted with the greatest obstacles to finding work. Their situation has worsened in recent years, as it has for university graduates, both to a similar degree. In contrast, among low- and lower-middle-income countries, youth unemployment rates have improved since 2023 for both young people with tertiary and secondary education.

Job creation is not keeping pace with the growth in the youth population in multiple regions.

As of 2024, youth population growth outpaced total employment growth in Eastern Asia, Eastern Europe, Northern America and Northern, Southern and Western Europe. This means the youth cohorts of these subregions increased faster than overall job creation, raising concerns about the capacity of economies to generate sufficient opportunities for young people.

While youth employment stagnates or declines, employment of adults has continued to expand. The global youth unemployment rate rose from 12.3 per cent in 2023 to 12.4 per cent in 2025 as the rate for adults (aged 25 and over) decreased from 3.7 per cent to 3.6 per cent. The diverging trends have resulted in an increasing ratio of youth-to-adult unemployment rates (at 3.4 in 2025), signalling heightened difficulties in the capacity of the global economy to onboard young talent. The ratio of the youth-to-adult unemployment rates has increased in Eastern Asia, Northern Africa, Northern America, Northern, Southern and Western Europe and Southern Asia.

AI and beyond – the erosion of middle-skilled jobs for youth.

Where youth employment is found to be shrinking, the persistently most affected jobs are those in the middle-skilled occupations, which include clerical support work; service and sales work; skilled agricultural, forestry and fishery work; craft and related trades work; and plant and machine operators, and assemblers. The “hollowing out” of middle-skills jobs thus includes some occupations that overlap with those deemed most exposed to disruption by artificial intelligence (AI) – mainly clerical and administrative occupations.

The report estimates that 6.1 per cent of jobs currently held by young people aged 15 to 29 fall in the categories of those most exposed to AI and, thus, most at risk to some level of AI-task (or job) replacement. If only 10 per cent of the jobs exposed to AI were to disappear in full, it would translate into 5.6 million employed youth – largely in high-income countries – facing unemployment, changing jobs or exiting the labour force.

The outlook of jobs for youth in operational technical occupations is also somewhat problematic. These include technical trades in the construction, manufacturing and food preparation sectors – occupations that tend to follow technical vocational education and training. The shrinking of opportunities for job entry in the manufacturing sector could be especially disruptive in developing economies struggling to grow their capacity to connect to global manufacturing supply chains as a route to economic development.

Jobs for young people in high-skilled knowledge-based technical areas – like science, engineering, health and information and communication technologies – have fared better, showing continued growth in most countries. The growth of jobs in these areas was positive across all country income groups, but especially in low- and lower-middle-income countries.

Bolstering the shaky foundations of labour market transitions to decent work for young people requires bold, adaptive policies and policy approaches.

These are challenging times for young people. But in many ways, the situation is not new. Economic growth itself is slowing and when economies falter, youth tend to bear the brunt of weak job creation. Such was the situation in the Great Recession (approximately 2007–09), the COVID-19 period (2020–21) and in many instances of national or regional crisis periods.

Governments and social partners are thus called upon to renew and reinvigorate the implementation of integrated youth employment strategies built around four mutually reinforcing pillars: (i) creating employment opportunities through gender-responsive macroeconomic and sectoral policies, enterprise development and entrepreneurship; (ii) preparing young people for productive engagement through quality education, apprenticeships and lifelong learning; (iii) facilitating labour market transitions through effective employment services and active labour market policies; and (iv) ensuring inclusion through social protection, rights at work and targeted support for disadvantaged groups.

At the same time, there is a sense that the current labour market situation facing youth is somehow different, in part because it is not underpinned by any obvious economic crisis. Economic growth is muted but still positive. Regardless, young people, with their voices amplified in the media, are increasingly expressing fear that their jobs will be replaced by technology and that their chances at job and income stability will be blocked by unprecedented technological (and other future of work) disruptions.

To the extent that young people's anxieties are fed by the evolving realities in the world of work – perceived or real – the policy responses to bring them "back to the future" where labour market pathways lead to secure and decent work for youth need to be adaptive and bold. These include:

- adopting a human-centred approach to AI (and other technology) governance;
- investing in skills that combine technical competencies with social and cognitive capabilities;
- strengthening lifelong learning systems;
- modernizing employment services;
- expanding social protection to cover diverse forms of work; and
- strengthening international cooperation to reduce widening inequalities in opportunities across countries.

Ultimately, the 2026 edition of the *GET for Youth* concludes that the central challenge is not only to generate more jobs for young people, but to ensure that these jobs provide the security, dignity and opportunities that underpin successful transitions to adulthood. Rebuilding confidence among today's youth will require renewed investment in decent work, stronger labour market institutions, and policies capable of helping young people navigate an increasingly uncertain future while ensuring that technological progress and economic transformation work for, rather than against, the next generation.

Structure of the report

This report harnesses evidence, both quantitative and qualitative, to show an increasing complexity in the labour market and in the labour market transitions of young people. It discusses the current labour market trends, focusing on the global and regional outlook of youth unemployment, inactivity (NEET) and employment, including the quality of work (in Chapter 1). Chapter 2 seeks to address the causality of the current less-than-positive labour market outcomes for young people. It examines the macroeconomic setting, the reality of rising global conflicts, the looming presence of AI and the issue of “job experience inflation” as factors behind the challenges of job entry. Chapter 3 looks at the policy framework for youth employment with an eye on how the scope of such policies can be adapted to support young people through their increasingly turbulent labour market transitions and set them on reaffirmed pathways towards decent work.

Advancing social justice, promoting decent work

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